

# LITERARINESS IN THE FILMS OF ERIC ROHMER

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	1
Abstract	2
Introduction	3
Chapter One: The Moral Tale: <i>Ma Nuit chez Maud</i>	14
Chapter Two: The Novella: <i>La Marquise d'O...</i>	41
Chapter Three: The Proverb: <i>La Femme de l'aviateur</i>	64
Chapter Four: The Fairy Tale: <i>Conte d'hiver</i>	84
Conclusion	103
Bibliography	107

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## Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the writings and films of French filmmaker, Eric Rohmer. I give an overview of the historical context of Rohmer and his work, as well as explore the notion of literariness, literariness in film, and literariness in the films of Eric Rohmer.

Though Rohmer was widely known as a *cinéaste*, he helped shape the French New Wave from the position of critical writer. In the early fifties, Rohmer joined François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, and Jacques Rivette to write for the newly established *Cahiers du Cinéma*. I analyze how Rohmer's critical work at the *Cahiers*, as well as his later film work, responds to theories of literariness in film from Alexandre Astruc and François Truffaut.

Rohmer invokes literariness when he creates films in series. Just as the moral tale serves as the literary model for each of the films in *Six contes moraux/Six Moral Tales*, the fairy tale serves as the model for each seasonal tale in *Contes des quatre saisons/Tales of the Four Seasons*. The literary models that Rohmer uses to create his films can be considered "light" forms, such as the moral tale or the fairy tale. However, the content of his films often relies on "heavy" literature, such as Blaise Pascal's *Pensées/Thoughts* or William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Each chapter examines a particular film to explore the various dimensions of "light" and "heavy" literature, and how they inform the textual strategies of Rohmer's films.

The films that I analyse, *Ma Nuit chez Maud/My Night at Maud's* (1969), *La Marquise d'O.../The Marquise d'O...* (1976), *La Femme de l'aviateur/The Aviator's Wife* (1980), and *Conte d'hiver/A Tale of Winter* (1992), represent a cross-section of Rohmer's work as an *auteur*. Analysis reveals that each film speaks to "literariness" in its own way.

## Introduction

My thesis is an exploration of the writings and films of French filmmaker, Eric Rohmer, looking specifically at how literariness informs the textual strategies of his films. I will give an overview of the historical context of Rohmer and his work, as well as explore the notion of literariness, literariness in film, and literariness in the films of Eric Rohmer.

Eric Rohmer has been making films from 1950 to the present day. He is a significant filmmaker and writer as he is one of the founding directors and critics working within the context of the *Nouvelle Vague*, the New Wave. The New Wave was a technological and theoretical revolution in filmmaking that took form in France from approximately 1958 to 1964. Founders of the New Wave include François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Rivette, and, of course, Eric Rohmer. These were the leaders of the French New Wave in both practice and theory.

In practice, Rohmer and his colleagues were the filmmakers of New Wave cinema. They took advantage of new technology. Lightweight, handheld cameras, faster film stocks requiring less light and lightweight sound and lighting equipment meant that films could be shot quickly and cheaply for the first time. This flexible equipment encouraged experimentation, improvisation, and spontaneity, which led to greater artistic freedom.

Films of the New Wave have a casual, natural look. They were often filmed on location, using available light over studio lighting and available sound over studio dubbing. The *mise-en-scène*, or setting, of New Wave films often consists of Parisian streets and cafes, as opposed to studio sets. The camera in New Wave films is often very

mobile and used in inventive ways, for example, following characters down streets, peering into bars and cafes, and observing the passers-by.

All of this was revolutionary compared to both the Hollywood and French studio films that were the standard of the time. Studio films were expensive. The old cameras were heavy and anchored to the ground. Actors had to stand on and move to predetermined marks. Compared to this paradigm, watching a New Wave film was a liberating experience. Some of the most famous films of the New Wave include Truffaut's *Les Quatre cent coups/The Four Hundred Blows* (1959) and Godard's *À bout de souffle/Breathless* (1960).

The New Wave, however, was not merely a revolution of technology, but also of film theory. Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, Rivette, and Rohmer were not only leaders of the New Wave in practice, but in its ideology as well. They were not only filmmakers, but also film critics, writing for the newly established film journal, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, under their mentor and editor-in-chief, André Bazin. It was within the pages of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* that New Wave theory took form. New Wave filmmakers and critics defined the movement against the established cinema of the previous generation, against studio films, “stagey” films, and even “literary” films, whereby adaptations of literary works were methodically produced for the screen. Paradoxically, however, when Rohmer and his colleagues wrote about the films and filmmakers they admired, they often used “literary” terminology, including “author,” “language,” and Alexandre Astruc’s revolutionary idiom, the “camera-pen.” From the notion that a director is an “author,” cinema a “language,” and the camera a “pen,” a new understanding of literariness in film began to emerge.

### **“Naissance d’une nouvelle avant-garde: la caméra-stylo”**

Appearing in *L’Ecran français* in 1948, Astruc’s essay, “Naissance d’une nouvelle avnt-garde: la caméra-stylo”/“The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo,” laid the groundwork for a new understanding of literariness in film when it likened the writer’s pen to the director’s camera. The essay opens with the assertion that “cinema is quite simply becoming a means of expression, just as all the other arts have been before it, and in particular painting and the novel” (17). Astruc declares that cinema is not only a new language, but also its own language, a legitimate and eloquent means of expressing one’s self, whereby an artist can “translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel” (18). Astruc asserts that, “this new age of cinema [is] the age of the *caméra-stylo* (camera-pen)” (18). Astruc’s idea that a filmmaker might “write” with his camera as a novelist writes with his pen inspired an approach to filmmaking and film criticism that continues to shape film theory.

Astruc explains that the cinema will “become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language” (18). Astruc predicts that the cinema will be able to address any subject, including, “the most philosophical meditations on human production, psychology, metaphysics, ideas and passions” (19). Furthermore, he proposes that had René Descartes been a contemporary philosopher, *Discours de la Méthode/Discourse on Method* would have been “written” on film. We will later explore how Rohmer’s cinema addresses this proposition in *La Femme de l’aviateur/The Aviator’s wife* (1980).

“Naissance d’une nouvelle avant-garde” likens the future of cinema to the history of literature. Astruc projects the possibility of “several cinemas,” just as there are “several literatures,” reasoning that, “the cinema, like literature, is not so much a

particular art as a language which can express any sphere of thought” (19). Astruc explains that we must be concerned only with “the creation of this new language” (21). To create this new language, Astruc concludes that the scriptwriter must either direct his own scripts, or simply cease to exist, because “direction is no longer a means of illustrating or presenting a scene, but a true act of writing” (22). Though Astruc presents his position passionately, he is ultimately hesitant to label the theory a “school” or even a “movement.” Instead, he calls his ideas for a new cinema a “tendency.” This particular word, “tendency,” would become a catalyst for another passionate critic, François Truffaut, who, six years later, would lambaste the old “tendencies” of French cinema and call for a new *politique*, that is, the *Politique des Auteurs*, an idea that began to take form in his article, “Une certaine tendance du cinéma français”/“A Certain Tendency of French Cinema”.

### **“Une Certaine tendance du cinéma français”**

Published in the *Cahiers* in 1954, François Truffaut’s seminal essay, “Une certaine tendance du cinéma français” furthered Astruc’s theory of cinema as language by introducing the *Politique des Auteurs*, or author theory of cinema, linking the position of literary author to that of the film director.<sup>1</sup> Truffaut attacks the French *Tradition de la Qualité*, quality cinema. Not only does the French *Tradition de la Qualité* produce films that exhibit a high degree of technical finish, but also it relies on a rather impersonal system of filmmaking, which requires many professionals to perform specialized tasks.

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<sup>1</sup> Although Truffaut’s essay outlines for the first time the idea of the author theory, he does not actually introduce the phrase, *Politique des Auteurs* within this text. Nor, as Phil Powrie and Keith Reader mistakenly suggest in *French Cinema: A Student’s Guide*, did André Bazin introduce the phrase in his 1957 essay, “La Politique des auteurs.” In fact, Truffaut himself introduces the phrase in 1955, a year after “Une Certaine tendance du cinéma français,” in a critical review of *Ali Baba et les quarante voleurs* (1954), titled, “*Ali Baba et la ‘politique des auteurs’*.”



According to Truffaut, French quality cinema is responsible for impersonal adaptations of famous literary works, such as *Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne/ Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), a film adaptation by Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost of a novel by Georges Bernanos. Truffaut desires a new direction for French cinema. He calls for a *cinéma d'auteurs*, a cinema of authors. Truffaut champions the work of artists who script their own films, who present their work from a personal perspective. He designates Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, Jean Cocteau, Jacques Becker, Abel Gance, Max Ophüls, Jacques Tati, and Roger Leenhardt as true *auteurs*, describing them as “des cinéastes français” ‘French filmmakers’ (26; my translation).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, he notes that, “il se trouve – curieuse coïncidence – que ce sont des *auteurs* qui écrivent souvent leur dialogue et quelques-uns inventent eux-mêmes les histoires qu’ils mettent en scène” ‘it is – curious coincidence – that they are *auteurs* who often write their own dialogue, and some invent themselves the stories that they put on screen’ (26; my translation). Truffaut praises films that are composed from a single point of view and promotes filmmakers who attempt to dialogue with their audiences.

A year after “Une Certaine tendance du cinéma français” shocked filmmakers and critics, Truffaut used his outline for the *cinéma d'auteurs* to review Jacques Becker’s *Ali Baba et les quarante voleurs/ Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1954). The review introduced, evidently for the first time, the phrase, *Politique des Auteurs*:

*Ali Baba* eut-il été raté que je l’eusse quand même défendu en vertu de la *Politique des Auteurs* que mes congénères en critique et moi-même pratiquons.

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<sup>2</sup> When I had access to an original French text, but to no published translation, I include my own translation, as cited. When I had access to both an original French text and a published translation, I include the published translation. In other instances, I had access to *only* the translated text (as with Astruc’s article), or sometimes only translated portions of text in secondary sources (as with some of Rohmer’s articles in Bérénice Reynaud’s “Representing the Sexual Impasse: Eric Rohmer’s *Les Nuits de la pleine lune* (1984),” as well as C.G. Crisp’s *Eric Rohmer: Realist and Moralist*).

Toute basée sur la belle formule de Giraudoux: “Il n’y a pas d’oeuvres, il n’y a que des auteurs. (47)

*Ali Baba* might have been missed had I not otherwise defended it under the terms of the *Politique des Auteurs*, which my colleagues in criticism and I myself practice. Very much based on the beautiful formula of Giraudoux: “There are no works, there are only authors. (my translation)

Truffaut concludes, “*Ali Baba* est le film d’un *auteur*, un auteur parvenu à une maîtrise exceptionnelle, un *auteur de films*. Ainsi la réussite technique d’*Ali Baba* confirme le bien-fondé de notre politique, la *Politique des Auteurs*” ‘*Ali Baba* is the film of an *auteur*, an author arrived at exceptional control, an *auteur des films*. Thus, the technical success of *Ali Baba* confirms the cogency of our *politique*, the *Politique des Auteurs*’ (47; my translation). Truffaut’s *Politique des Auteurs* became, in many ways, the battle cry for the films and critical writings of the New Wave.

### **“Le Celluloïd et le marbre”**

Rohmer’s first major theoretical essay at the *Cahiers*, “Le Celluloïd et le marbre”/“Celluloid and Marble,” was published in 1955, the year after Truffaut’s “Une certaine tendance du cinéma français.” Rohmer, like his New Wave colleagues, was also interested in exploring the particular virtues of film. “Le Celluloïd et le marbre” examines cinema in relation to not only the novel, but also painting, poetry, music and architecture. Rohmer, in an attempt to define film against the other arts, dismisses each in turn. Painting is static and incapable of representing time. Poetry disguises the truth. Music represents only an internal, spiritual world, and finally, architecture, as an art, suffers from an obligation to be useful. Rohmer ultimately argues that film, more than any other art, is “pour les âges à venir, le plus fidèle témoin” ‘the most faithful witness for the times to come’ (33; my translation).

Perhaps in response to Astruc's *caméra-stylo* and Truffaut's *Politique des Auteurs*, Rohmer, in the very first instalment of "Le Celluloïd et le marbre," explores the nature of film in relation to the novel. Responding to Astruc's notion that film is a new language, Rohmer declares, "il n'importe pas tant de montrer qu'elle parle un autre langue, mais dit *autre chose*, que nous n'avions pas jusque-là, songé à exprimer" 'it is not important that it speak another language, but that it say *something else*, which we had not, until now, thought of expressing' (33; my translation). Rohmer states that film, in fact, speaks the same language as literature, explaining, "Mais un bon film ne me paraît pas parler un autre dialecte que ma mère Littérature" 'But a good film does not seem to me to speak any other dialect than my mother Literature' (36; my translation).

During the following decade, though his critical work at the *Cahiers*, Rohmer would continue to develop his own ideas about the use of literariness in film. In *Eric Rohmer: Realist and Moralist*, C.G. Crisp includes a survey of the relationship between film and novel, published in the *Cahiers* in 1966, in which Rohmer states:

I am inclined to think that the literary dimension is no less fruitful than the lyrical or the theatrical. It is easier for the novelist to describe the mental world than the physical. For the filmmaker, the contrary is true. But given that difficulty renders any task more challenging, it's natural that we should be more and more curious to pierce the external shell of things, which the stark image presents to us...It seems to me that this exploration of the internal world is only just beginning in cinema, and is destined to transform all the old narrative recipes, conventions, and tricks of the trade. (Crisp 11)

Rohmer uses literariness "to pierce the external shell of things," to break through the "stark image," and to explore the "internal world." Though inspired by the critical work of his colleagues and predecessors, Rohmer develops his own notion of "literariness" through his critical writings and later film work. Furthermore, Rohmer's notion and use of literariness proves to be flexible and continues to evolve.

Rohmer invokes literary form when he creates films in series. Just as the *conte moral*, the moral tale serves as the literary model for each of the films in *Six contes moraux/Six Moral Tales*, the *conte de fée*, the fairy tale serves as the model for each seasonal tale in *Contes des quatre saisons/Tales of the Four Seasons*. The literary models that Rohmer uses to create his films can be considered “light” forms, such as the moral tale, the fairy tale, the novella, or the proverb. However, the content of his films often relies on “heavy” literature, such as Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées/Thoughts* in *Ma Nuit chez Maud/My Night at Maud’s* (1969), which is the third film in *Six contes moraux*, or William Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* in *Conte d’hiver/A Tale of Winter* (1992), one of the films in *Contes des quatre saisons*. Through film analysis, I explore the various dimensions of “light” and “heavy” literature and how they inform the textual strategies of Rohmer’s films. The dichotomy of “light” and “heavy” may imply “popular” and “elite” cultures, “low” and “high” cultures, or even “short” and “epic” forms. Each chapter examines a particular film to analyze how Rohmer uses “light” literary models to discuss “heavy” literary themes in his films.

The films that I have chosen to analyse, *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, *La Marquise d’O.../The Marquise of O...* (1976), *La Femme de l’aviateur*, and *Conte d’hiver*, represent a cross-section of Rohmer’s work as an *auteur*; each film speaks to “literariness” in its own way. Three of the four films, *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, *La Femme de l’aviateur*, and *Conte d’hiver*, are from film series, Rohmer’s unique literary approach to filmmaking, while *La Marquise d’O...* is a literary adaptation. Finally, the films, and thus the chapters, progress chronologically, each film produced in a different decade, from *Ma Nuti chez Maud* (1969) to *Conte d’hiver* (1992).

In “Chapter One: The Moral Tale: *Ma Nuit chez Maud*,” I explore how the moral tale informs Rohmer’s *Six contes moraux*. The moral tale is a “light” literary style that emerged in France in the 1750s. Rohmer wrote his *Six contes moraux* as literary tales, not film scenarios, twenty years before he made them into films. I compare these tales to their film counterparts to discover whether the films are indeed adaptations of Rohmer’s own moral tales. I also explore whether Rohmer based his literary tales on F.W. Murnau’s Hollywood silent classic, *Sunrise* (1927), an adaptation of Hermann Sudermann’s “Die Reise nach Tilsit”/“The Trip to Tilsit,” another moral tale. Finally, I examine how Rohmer uses literariness to explore both irony and morality in Clermont-Ferrand in the historical context of fascism and Vichy France

In “Chapter Two: The Novella: *La Marquise d’O...*,” I explore how Rohmer uses the “light” literary form of the novella to portray Heinrich von Kleist’s tale of an “unseen” rape. Following his initial intertextual exploration of adaptation in *Six contes moraux*, Rohmer fully respects the authority of the sole author of *Die Marquise von O.../The Marquise of O...* in his film, *La Marquise d’O...*. As it is a period piece and a costume drama, *La Marquise d’O...* stands apart from other Rohmer films that shed light on contemporary characters and situations. Rohmer also rethinks literariness when he revisits and reinvents the French *Tradition de la Qualité* with his “word for word” adaptation of Kleist’s novella.

In “Chapter Three: The Proverb: *La Femme de l’aviateur*,” I explore how the proverb informs the films in Rohmer’s *Comédies et Proverbes*. “Proverb,” in this case, has two meanings. In the first instance, a proverb is an antiquated expression of wisdom, such as the proverb that opens *La Femme de l’aviateur*, “On ne saurait penser à rien”

‘One can’t think of nothing.’ However, a proverb, or *proverbe*, is also a French dramatic fable that frequently possesses a moral theme. I examine how the former informs the textual strategies of Rohmer’s film. The proverb, like the novella, is a “light” literary form in that it is short and concise. Rohmer’s choice of proverbs, however, as with his choice of Kleist’s novella, indicates a desire to explore “heavy” literary themes.

Although Rohmer does not cite the source of the central proverb of *La Femme de l’aviateur*, “One can’t think of nothing,” it is likely a reference to René Descartes’ “Je pense, donc je suis” ‘I think, therefore I am.’ Perhaps due to its lack of narrative and structure, Rohmer uses the proverb as a starting point to experiment with Astruc’s caméra-stylo, using the mise-en-scène in a “writerly” way.

In “Chapter Four: The Fairy Tale: *Conte d’hiver*,” I explore how the fairy tale informs the films in Rohmer’s *Contes des quatre saisons*. The fairy tale is a “light” literary style often associated with French writer Charles Perrault, who wrote the popular fairy tale, “Cinderella.” All four of the films in Rohmer’s *Contes des quatre saisons* might be interpreted as contemporary Cinderella tales, but none so much as *Conte d’hiver*. I explore how Rohmer uses this light literary style as a platform to present the “heavy” literature incorporated in the content of *Conte d’hiver*, including Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, Plato’s theory of the soul’s recollection, *The Longest Journey* by E.M. Forester, and once again, Pascal’s wager.

Rohmer’s work with literariness in film, as both critic and filmmaker, has left its mark not only on his career, but on fifty years of filmmaking. Rohmer draws not only from filmic sources, but also from generations of literary conventions. Ultimately, as an *auteur*, Rohmer uses literariness to break through the “stark image” and explore the

“internal world,” in his hope to “say *something else*, which we had not, until now, thought of expressing” (“Le Celluloid et le marbre” 33).

## Chapter One: The Moral Tale: *Ma Nuit chez Maud*

Pourquoi filmer une histoire, quand on peut l'écrire? Pourquoi l'écrire, quand on va la filmer? Cette double question n'est oiseuse qu'en apparence. Elle s'est posée très précisément à moi. (7)

'Why film a story when one can write it? Why write it when one is going to film it? This double question is not as trivial as it seems. It is exactly this question that I ask myself. (my translation)

-Eric Rohmer, *Avant-propos*, Preface, *Six contes moraux* (1974)

Prefacing his collection of short stories, *Six contes moraux/Six Moral Tales*, Rohmer writes, "L'idée de ces Contes m'est venue à un âge où je ne savais pas encore si je serais cinéaste" 'The idea for these tales came to me at a time when I did not know whether I was going to be a filmmaker' (*Six contes moraux* 7; *Six Moral Tales* v).

During the formative years of the New Wave, from approximately 1958 to 1964, Rohmer struggled to decide whether to become a writer or a filmmaker. Not only does his critical work at the *Cahiers du cinéma* reflect this, but also it is evident in the films he directed. Ultimately, Rohmer worked with both art forms – writing and filmmaking – and each influenced, and was influenced by, the other. Whereas New Wave colleagues Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut became known for making the archetypal films of New Wave cinema, Rohmer would be noted for the literariness of his films.

According to the preface to Rohmer's literary tales, *Six contes moraux*, the idea for these stories came before his intention to become a filmmaker. However, Rohmer later admits that he did not actually write the stories until he had decided to film them. And yet, when he wrote these "six moral tales," Rohmer did not write them as film scripts, but as short stories, with, in his own words, "une apparence résolument littéraire" 'a resolutely literary quality' (*Six contes moraux* 7; *Six Moral Tales* v). In the end, these six short stories became six films: *La Boulangère de Monceau/The Girl at the Monceau*



*Bakery* (1963), *La Carrière de Suzanne/Suzanne's Career* (1963), *Ma Nuit chez Maud/My Night at Maud's* (1969), *La Collectionneuse/The Collector* (1967), *Le Genou de Claire/Claire's Knee* (1970), and *L'Amour l'après-midi/Love in the Afternoon* (1972).

Curiously, the short stories upon which these films are based were not published until 1974, at which time they were put out as a collection of short stories by *Editions de l'Herne*, with a preface by the author, Rohmer. The time lag of two years, between the last film being released and the short stories being published, makes it difficult to know how much the filming of these short stories influenced the literary form.

*Ma Nuit chez Maud*, the third film in the *Six contes moraux* series (though the fourth to be released), earned Rohmer international recognition not only as a filmmaker, but also as a screenwriter. He was nominated for the Academy Award's "Best Original Screenplay" in 1971. But was it really an "original" screenplay, or merely an adapted screenplay – adapted by Rohmer from one of his own short stories? Discussing the relationship between the literary *Six contes moraux* and the cinematic *Six contes moraux*, Rohmer writes, "Eux-mêmes et ce qu'ils véhiculaient – personnages, situations, paroles – avaient besoin d'affirmer leur antériorité à la mise-en-scène, bien qu'elle seule possédât la vertu de les faire être pleinement" 'It was as though these stories, and what they were portraying – characters, plot, dialogues – had a need to assert that they did precede the films, even though only the act of making the films gave the stories their full meaning' (*Six contes moraux* 7; *Six Moral Tales* v). Perhaps Rohmer's vacillating desire to become at once a writer and a filmmaker was so overwhelming that he was ultimately incapable of tackling one without engaging the other. Or perhaps Rohmer was merely exploring Alexandre Astruc's *caméra-stylo* and François Truffaut's *Politique des Auteurs*. To

become the “author” of the mise-en-scène of his film, Rohmer became the author of a literary text of the same story. Before “writing” with the camera-pen, he wrote with an actual pen. However, it is necessary to study both the films and their literary counterparts to discover whether the films are, indeed, adaptations of Rohmer’s own moral tales. It is possible that by writing the stories as literary tales, only to film them later, and to publish the literary tales later still, Rohmer effaces the idea of “original” and “copy.”

### **The Moral Tale**

It is important to realize the significance of the history of the moral tale as a literary form to better understand the social, political, and intellectual nuance of Rohmer’s *Six contes moraux*, specifically with regard to *Ma Nuit chez Maud*. The *conte moral*, or “moral tale,” is a specific literary style that emerged in France in the 1750s, with Jean-François Marmontel as the self-proclaimed creator of the genre. The moral tale was a new “light” literary style as it was both a short form of literature, as well as a style of prose appealing not only to the intellectual elite, but also, and perhaps more so, to the general public. Though the moral tale was at once entertaining and appealing to the masses, authors writing in this new, light literary style were still capable of addressing “heavy” subjects and important issues. According to Katherine Astbury in her study of the *conte moral*, *The Moral tale in France and Germany: 1750-1789*, the moral tale came into being as a response to a new social atmosphere in not only France, but Germany as well, which concentrated on ideas of morality and virtue as a crucial means to regenerate society (1-3). Astbury explains that the moral tales “combined morality and mores in an accessible way, and as *tableaux* of society they reflect the aims and aspirations of the age, revealing much about literary, philosophical, social, and political concerns” (2).

Ultimately, the moral tale became a form of popular expression of enlightened ideas about injustice, women in society, and social and economic class divisions.

While the moral tales acted as “literary *tableaux*” of society, it is worth noting that, during this time, there emerged also visual *tableaux* of moral society. Film theorist Angela Dalle Vacche, in *Cinema and Painting: How Art is Used in Film*, notes that Rohmer himself would find inspiration in the paintings of Jean-Baptiste Greuze, such as *The Paternal Curse* (1777-1778) and *The Punished Son* (1778), in rendering the domestic conflict in the film he made following his *Six contes moraux*, *La Marquise d’O...*, the narrative of which is set in 1799, nearly at the height of the moral tale’s prominence in society (97). Dalle Vacche notes that Greuze achieved the approval of critics such as Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot, because his paintings of domestic scenes were found to be “pedagogically useful” (97). Dalle Vacche explains that, “For Diderot, Greuze’s display of emotion was at the service of a neoclassical program of moral edification” (97). As visual renderings of conflict and disruption in society, the existence of these moral *tableaux* are thus important to the birth of the moral tale as itself a *tableau* of society.

In Rohmer’s series of moral tales, all six literary and filmic tales share the same basic narrative. Film critic James Monaco, in his inaugural study of the New Wave, explains the recurring narrative of the series as that of “a man who has a commitment to one woman meets another and is attracted to her but avoids making love with her and finally returns to the first woman” (291). For example, in *La Boulangère de Monceau*, a boy sees a girl in the street, falls in love with her, but promptly loses track of her. As he spends the next several weeks searching for this girl, he also becomes engrossed with a

girl at the Monceau bakery. He makes a date with the bakery girl. However, just as he is about to meet her, he rediscovers his first love, and breaks his date with the *boulangère*.

In *La Carrière de Suzanne*, a young student casually dates a girl named Suzanne at the urging of his older friend, though he is actually interested in another young woman. He gradually begins to avoid Suzanne, and ultimately he is united with the true object of his affection. In *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, the main character decides to make Françoise his wife, based only on the fact that she is both blonde and Catholic. Shortly after this decision, he spends a night (although not consummated) with Maud. In the end, he is able to resist Maud's affectionate advances and eventually realizes his first intention of marrying Françoise. In *La Collectionneuse*, Adrien, a young professional on vacation at the sea, desires the beautiful Haydée Politoff, herself a "collector" of men. Ultimately, Adrien resists Haydée's raw, sexual appeal and saves himself for another girl, who is introduced only briefly at the opening of the film. In *Le Genou de Claire*, Jérôme, betrothed to an absent Lucinde, must overcome his desire for Claire's knee. And finally, according to Monaco, *L'Amour, l'après-midi* "is built around the most complex relationship in the series," as Frédéric and Hélène are not only married, but also have children, "the living bonds of commitment" (298). Only in the final scenes of the film, does Frédéric reject the beautiful bohemian Chloë and return to his wife, Hélène. Like Monaco, Richard Neupert, in *A History of the French New Wave*, asserts that the basic narrative is the same for all six films of the series, explaining that the six stories "all revolve around a similar schema: A male protagonist is interested in or committed to one woman, becomes distracted by a second woman, but finally takes stock of his life and returns to his original plans. Much of each story is preoccupied with this 'digression' to another woman, so the

movies concentrate on what could be considered the time wasted by an indecisive man” (255).

According to Neupert, the basic narrative structure for each of the *Six contes moraux* is the result of Rohmer’s interest in “revisiting and reworking [a] sort of plot device, which he had discovered in one of his favorite movies, F.W. Murnau’s *Sunrise*” (255). *Sunrise* (1927) is the story of a provincial, married man tempted by the sensuality of a woman from the city. Enticed by a passionate relationship with the woman, the man decides to drown his wife at sea and run away to the city with his mistress. Before he carries out the horrific crime, however, the man rediscovers his love for his wife. When a sudden storm overtakes the couple at sea, the man, with renewed devotion to his wife, tries to save her; but it seems that she has drowned. At sunrise, though, his wife is found in the water, still alive. The couple is reunited, and the mistress returns to the city alone. Intrigued by the plot device of *Sunrise*, Rohmer would have been led to the origin of the film’s narrative, which is found in Hermann Sudermann’s “Die Reise nach Tilsit”/“The Trip to Tilsit,” first published in 1917, in Sudermann’s book of short stories, *Litauische Geschichten/Lithuanian Stories*. *Sunrise* follows the narrative of “The Trip to Tilsit” with one significant exception: In Sudermann’s tale, the man and his wife are not reunited after the storm. Instead, the husband drowns at sea. Although Sudermann’s tale was written more than a hundred years after the birth of the moral tale, “The Trip to Tilsit” still subscribes to both the style and function of the literary genre, a short story revealing social concerns, appealing to intellectuals and the public alike.

*Sunrise*, by contrast, does not subscribe to the function of the moral tale. Film critic Dudley Andrew, in his essay “The Turn and Return of *Sunrise*,” argues that Carl

Mayer's adaptation of "The Trip to Tilsit," for Murnau's *Sunrise*, reduced the complex moral tale to little more than "melodrama, or...medieval fable" (30). The original complexity of the tale, grounded in its moral ambiguity, has been lost. The simplicity of Murnau's melodrama may be attributed to Hollywood's ubiquitous "happy ending." While Sudermann's tale ends with the tragic death of the husband, Murnau's film ends with husband and wife happily reunited. Rohmer restores the original complexity of Sudermann's moral tale in *Ma Nuit chez Maud* by recreating moral ambiguity through irony. The "happy ending" conceived by Rohmer is ironic. Rohmer's protagonist makes the blonde, Catholic virgin his wife, only to finally discover that she is no virgin. It is an ironic take on the Hollywood happy ending. Rohmer's irony can be misread as simplicity. However, Rohmer's use of irony is an important element of both his literary tales and his films, which will be explored further in the analysis of *Ma Nuit chez Maud*.

The moral tale, a light literary form, serves as the literary model for the films in *Six contes moraux*. In *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, the philosophical treatises of Blaise Pascal are cited, invoking the light literary model of the moral tale. Pascal was a Catholic writer and philosopher in seventeenth century France. As philosophical treatises, Pascal's *Penées/Thoughts* might be considered "heavy" literature. However, according to Anthony Levi in his introduction to *Pensées and Other Writings*, Pascal wrote his famous philosophy "concerning God, religion, and many sorts of human behaviour" as "miscellaneous private jottings" (vii). The *Pensées* are literally "thoughts" from Pascal's personal journal, and as such might also be deemed a light form of literary discourse. However, Rohmer's film envelops more than the philosophical concerns of the seventeenth century.

*Ma Nuit chez Maud* also reveals the social and political concerns of the French bourgeoisie in the wake of May '68, France's "failed revolution." The revolution of '68 was a revolution of morality. Rohmer uses the moral tale, a literary form from the eighteenth century, to examine the impact of the moral revolution on the bourgeois society of Clermont-Ferrand in 1969. Unlike the cinema of his New Wave colleagues, like Godard, Rohmer's *Ma Nuit chez Maud* does not claim to be revolutionary. In fact, Rohmer's cinema is a counterpoint to Godard's revolutionary films. While Godard's films carry an overt political message, Rohmer's films do not. Rohmer's films are neither didactic nor heavy-handed. Instead, Rohmer's cinema, including *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, is not only ambiguous, but also ironic and subtle. While a revolutionary knows no irony, irony itself can be subversive. In the eighteenth century, the irony of a moral tale could suggest progressive ideas about injustice, women in society, and social and economic class divisions. In a similar manner, the irony of Rohmer's moral tale exposes the hypocrisy of religious ideology and of certain social mores and morality of the '68 revolution.

It is important to emphasize that the moral tale, as we discuss it here, is not the same genre as the storytelling device commonly known as a didactic, or instructional, tale, such as fables, parables, allegories, and even proverbs. These didactic tales, frequently referred to as "moral tales" in English, are stories that often conclude with the simple edict, "the moral of the story is...." The difference between the *conte moral*, as it is understood in France and as it is used and understood in the French language, and a didactic or "moral" tale, as it is understood in English, is an important distinction, not merely for our discussion here, but also for Rohmer and the complexity of his cinema.

James Monaco includes Rohmer's own analysis of the French moral tale in his essay, "Rohmer, Moral Tales: The Art of Courtly Love," in which he elucidates the meaning of the French *conte moral*:

In French there is a word *moraliste* that I don't think has any equivalent in English. It doesn't really have much connection with the word "moral." A *moraliste* is someone who is interested in the description of what goes on inside man. He's concerned with states of mind and feelings. For example, in the eighteenth century Pascal was a *moraliste*, and a *moraliste* is a particularly French kind of writer like La Bruyère or La Rochefoucauld, and you could also call Stendhal a *moraliste* because he describes what people feel and think. So *Contes Moraux* doesn't really mean that there's a moral contained in them, even though there might be one and all the characters in these films act according to certain moral ideas that are fairly clearly worked out. In *Ma Nuit chez Maud* these ideas are very precise; for all the characters in the other films they are rather more vague, and morality is a very personal matter. But they try to justify everything in their behavior and that fits the word "moral" in its narrowest sense. But "moral" can also mean that they are people who like to bring their motives, the reasons for their actions, into the open. They try to analyze; they are not people who act without thinking about what they are doing. What matters is what they *think* about their behavior, rather than the behavior itself. They aren't films of action, they aren't films in which physical action takes place, they aren't films in which there is anything very dramatic, they are films in which a particular feeling is analyzed and where even the characters themselves analyze their feelings and are very introspective. That's what *Conte Moral* means. (Monaco 292-293)

From this declaration, Monaco asserts that Rohmer's films owe their power "more to literary than to cinematic traditions" (289). He aligns Rohmer's films with literary figures such as Henry James and Marcel Proust, deeming literariness as a "long and honored intellectual tradition" (293). Indeed, looking at literariness in Rohmer's films is not an entirely new approach to his cinema. Monaco later admits that Rohmer's films are "highly cinematic works," insisting on the unquestionable connection between Rohmer's "psychology of reason" and James's "psychological realism" (293). However, through a comparative analysis of Rohmer's literary tale, *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, and his film of the same story, it is my hope to establish that Rohmer's literariness is not merely a tribute to



intellectual tradition, but a continuing and open dialogue between filmic and literary conventions.

### **Irony: The Literary Tale and the Film**

Set during Christmastime, the narrator and protagonist of the film is an engineer at the Michelin tire complex in Clermont-Ferrand. The narrator, played by Jean-Louis Trintignant, remains unnamed in both the literary tale and the film.<sup>3</sup> Having worked for several years abroad in Canada and South America, Trintignant has returned to the region where he grew up, searching for the perfect wife, a blonde-haired, practicing Catholic. Just when he thinks he has found her, he finds himself accidentally spending the night and sharing a bed with a seductive divorcée, Maud. Trintignant is able to evade Maud's advances and instead marries the innocent, blonde Catholic, Françoise. Five years later, however, Trintignant discovers that his Catholic wife, mother of his young son, is the ex-lover of Maud's ex-husband. To put his wife's guilty conscious finally at ease, Trintignant allows Françoise to believe that his night with Maud was consummated.

The basic, situational irony of *Ma Nuit chez Maud* exists similarly in both the literary tale and the film. Norman King, in "Eye for irony: Eric Rohmer's *Ma Nuit chez Maud* (1969)," asserts that, "*Maud's* narrator claims to have a hold on his life, to be in control of his luck, but from the outset he is...misplaced" (206). Trintignant is returning from Valparaiso and Canada to Clermont-Ferrand, the Michelin tire factory, Catholicism, Pascal, and a rented house in the countryside. He not only has no name, but also no "territory," all the while professing that, "Je suis très sensible de l'orientation des lieux" 'I have always had a strong sense of place' (*Six contes moraux* 64; *Six Moral Tales* 57).

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<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of discussion, I will refer to the film's protagonist as "Trintignant" from now on.

Although the film of *Ma Nuit chez Maud* seems to follow the literary tale closely, there are differences between the two works. Indeed, after writing the literary tale, Rohmer may have wanted to do something different with the film. Rohmer's reinvention of irony from the literary tale to the film illustrates the burgeoning dialogue between filmic and literary conventions. The opening of the literary tale is an introduction into the narrator's stream of consciousness:

Je ne dirai pas tout dans cette histoire. D'ailleurs il n'y a pas d'histoire, mais une série, un choix d'événements très quelconques, de hazards, de coïncidences, comme il en arrive toujours plus ou moins dans la vie, et qui n'ont d'autre sens que celui qu'il m'a plu de leur donner. (63)

In this story I'm not going to tell everything. Besides, there isn't any story, really: just a series of very ordinary events, of chance happenings and coincidences of the kind we have all experienced at one time or another in our lives. The deeper meanings of these events will be whatever I choose to endow them with. (57)

There is remarkably no introduction to a particular setting, nor anything that might indicate the time and place of the story in the literary text. The lack of narrative overview is because the tale's narrator does not have an omniscient point of view. He is limited to describe only what he can see and hear, think and feel. The narrator himself admits that, "The deeper meanings of these events will be whatever I choose to endow them with" (57). However, he later ironically insists that, "Mes sentiments, mes idées, mes croyances n'entrent pas en ligne de compte" 'But my feelings, my own opinions and beliefs, will not intrude upon the line of the story' (*Six contes moraux* 63; *Six Moral Tales* 57). In *Screening the Text: Intertextuality in New Wave French Cinema*, T. Jefferson Kline asserts that the opening statements of Rohmer's literary tale "constitute a prescription for narrative unreliability" (122). I would further argue that the narrator is not only unreliable, but also duplicitous. Duplicitous male protagonists are, in fact, found throughout the tales and films of *Six contes moraux*. For example, Jérôme, in *Le Genou*

*de Claire*, insists that he is prepared to wed Lucinde, although he is infatuated with Claire, Laura, and perhaps even Aurora. In *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, the narrator's unreliability is evidence of the irony in Rohmer's tale. There is also irony in the film, but it is expressed differently, and perhaps more subtly.

Irony has long been a tool of writers. According to Katharina Barbe in *Irony in Context*, traditional irony is "an admixture of ideas from Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian" (61). The use of irony as more than negative expression or reproach is historically attributed to Socrates and the Socratic dialogues. According to Barbe, Socratic irony, developed in the fourth century BC, "denotes a discrepancy between appearance and an assumed reality and shares the element of duality with other types of irony" (62). A similar, contemporary exploration of literary irony can be found in M. M. Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* from 1963. Bakhtin likewise examines the duality of irony in the "double voice," whereby two consciousnesses coexist in one voice (102). The double voice is evident in the opening passage of the literary tale of *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, wherein the narrator directly contradicts himself, alleging to be at once partial and impartial to the tale he is telling. He admits that, "The deeper meanings of these events will be whatever I choose to endow them with," while later claiming, "But my feelings, my own opinions and beliefs, will not intrude upon the line of the story" (57). Written in the first person and almost entirely in the present tense, the irony of the literary tale is obvious because the narrator's conflicting intentions are articulated in the same utterance.

In the film, the irony is subtler. The first person narrative of the literary tale might have leant itself to a film dominated by a voiceover narration. However, while the

literary tale begins with first person narration, the film opens with a silent shot of the countryside surrounding Clermont-Ferrand. Ultimately, there are only two occurrences of voiceover in the entire film. In the preface to the literary tale, Rohmer comments on the lack of voiceover in the corresponding film, admitting, “et j’eus un moment l’intention de faire courir dans le film un commentaire continue, de la première à la dernière image” ‘I intended to have a continuous commentary run from the first image to the last’ (*Six contes moraux* 10; *Six Moral Tales* viii). He goes on to explain, “Peu à peu, passa dans la bouche des personnages ce qui était destiné à la voix hors-champ” ‘Little by little, however, the text initially intended for the voice-over shifted into the mouth of one character or another’ (*Six contes moraux* 10; *Six Moral Tales* viii). In the film, the first person, present tense narrative is challenged by the image. The irony that was produced by the double voice is now generated by the discourse between “voice” and “image.” For example, Trintignant claims, in a voiceover, that he wants to marry Françoise, but spends the eponymous “night at Maud’s.” Furthermore, Trintignant’s seemingly chance encounters are, according to King, “in fact motivated by unavowed intentions” (206). Indeed, Trintignant spends most of the film searching for Françoise and often finding someone or something else. From Léonide Kogan’s concert to Midnight Mass, Trintignant scans the crowd in search of Françoise. He frequents student bookstores and cafés, eager to bump into her, but instead he rediscovers Pascal and runs into Vidal. He roams the streets of Clermont-Ferrand by car, hoping to spot Françoise on her motorbike, but instead meets a colleague from the tire factory. King describes the irony as “the distance between engagement and estrangement, the slippage between first and third person [...] an irony which privileges the attentive spectator who is cast in a position of

intelligence, whose understanding surpasses that of the characters [...and] establishes a complicity between the spectator and the image at the expense of the protagonists” (207). The final irony of *Ma Nuit chez Maud* transpires when Trintignant finally does find Françoise. He marries his blonde-haired, Catholic bride only to discover that she is the tainted ex-lover of Maud’s ex-husband.

### **Clermont-Ferrand: Church and State**

While there is an intertextual dialogue between the literary tale and the film, there is also an extratextual dialogue between the film and Clermont-Ferrand, where the film is set. In the opening shot of the film, we are immediately introduced to the Clermont-Ferrand countryside. In the literary tale, however, this setting is not introduced until the third paragraph when the narrator relates, “J’étais à Clermont-Ferrand. Ingénieur chez Michelin depuis deux mois” ‘I was living in Clermont-Ferrand, an industrial city in south-central France, where for two months I had been working as an engineer at the Michelin tire complex’ (*Six contes moraux* 63; *Six Moral Tales* 57). It is significant that the English-language translation of the text identifies Clermont-Ferrand as “an industrial city in south-central France,” and phrases Michelin as “the tire complex.” These descriptions are not included in the original French literary text, because, to a French reader, both Clermont-Ferrand and Michelin would be readily identifiable. This is particularly true of Clermont-Ferrand, a location loaded with historical, literary and cinematic associations. Clermont-Ferrand is the birthplace of the famous writer and philosopher, Pascal, whose *Pensées* are cited in dialogues in *Ma Nuit chez Maud*. Clermont-Ferrand is also the subject and setting of Marcel Ophüls’s controversial documentary on the occupation of France, *Le Chagrin et la pitié/The Sorrow and the Pity*

(1969). *Le Chagrin et la pitié* was shot in Clermont-Ferrand between 1967 and 1969, at the same time as Rohmer shot *Ma Nuit chez Maud*.

The historical significance of Ophüls's documentary is intrinsically linked to Clermont-Ferrand, a city occupied by Nazi Germany from 1940 to 1944. Clermont-Ferrand is the largest town near Vichy, the capital of occupied France. Occupied France spawned the manipulation of religious ideals. According to John F. Sweets, in his book *Choices in Vichy France: The French Under Occupation*, "Few of the leaders of the Vichy regime were fanatically religious, but [...] many of them felt that French Catholicism's support for order and discipline, and its respect for the family and the established political hierarchy, was in keeping with their design for a more disciplined, obedient nation" (54). The occupied France of World War II saw France's tripartite revolutionary cry, "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*" / "Liberty, Equality, Brotherhood" become Premier Philippe Pétain's "*Travail, famille, patrie*" / "Work, Family, Fatherland." When French citizens lost their lust for the freedom of the republic, the nation in crisis became a breeding ground for a duplicitous Catholic creed.

The treacherous connection between church and state becomes a subtext in Rohmer's film, a relation not evident in the literary text. In the literary tale, we know the narrator attends Sunday morning mass because he relates, "Je vais, tous les dimanches, à la messe de onze heures à Notre-Dame du Port" 'Every Sunday, I go to the eleven-o'clock mass at Notre-Dame, in town' (*Six contes moraux* 65; *Six Moral Tales* 59). In the film, however, we actually witness Trintignant at mass. In addition, we overhear significant snippets of sermons and prayers not found in the text of the literary tale. In the film, Trintignant, however, spends most of his time in the cathedral searching for

Françoise. His mindless recitation of the priest's incantations reflects his mindless determination to marry a "practicing Catholic." The film's mise-en-scène of the cathedral invokes the collusive relationship that once existed in Clermont-Ferrand between the Vichy regime and the Catholic Church.

Because of the historical significance of Clermont-Ferrand, as well as Ophüls's *Le Chagrin et la pitié*, certain scenes take on political undertones in the film. For example, in both the literary tale and the film, a conversation takes place between Maud and Trintignant in Maud's apartment. In the literary tale, there are no apparent political undertones. In the film, however, the scene recalls a particular clip from Ophüls's documentary. In the literary tale of *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, Maud teases Trintignant about his plans for marriage, probing, "Comment vous marierez-vous, alors?" 'So how will you go about getting married then?' (*Six contes moraux* 95; *Six Moral Tales* 91). He responds, "Je ne sais pas: par petites annonces: 'Ingénieur, trente-quatre ans, catholique, un mètre soixante-douze...'" 'I don't know. Maybe through a classified ad: 'Engineer, thirty-four years old, Catholic, five feet eleven inches tall...' (*Six contes moraux* 95; *Six Moral Tales* 91). Maud finishes the ad, contributing, "'physique agréable, possédant voiture, cherche jeune fille blonde, catholique... pratiquante'" "...good-looking, with own car, seeks blond girl, Catholic' – correct that to 'practicing Catholic..." (*Six contes moraux* 95; *Six Moral Tales* 91). In the literary tale, the exchange is a flirtatious joke, with no evident political undertones. In the film however, the scene recalls a similar scenario from Ophüls's documentary.

The notion of writing a classified ad in search of a "practicing" Catholic is echoed in a scene from *Le Chagrin et la pitié*. In Ophüls's documentary, a shopkeeper from

Clermont-Ferrand, Marius Klein, is interviewed for the film. Klein speaks with pride of his status as a World War I veteran. However, when the interviewer asks Klein of his experience in Clermont-Ferrand during World War II, Klein admits to writing a classified ad during the Nazi occupation of the region. The ad was not to advertise for a “practicing” Catholic wife, as in Rohmer’s fictional narrative, but rather to advertise Klein’s own status as a “practicing” Catholic shopkeeper...and not a Jew. The same advertisement that pronounces Klein a good, “practicing” Catholic also implies the compliance, or perhaps the “collaboration,” of the French with the Nazis’ annihilation of the Jews. The collusion of church and Vichy state in Ophüls’s documentary resurfaces in Rohmer’s film, ironically underscoring Trintignant’s search for a good, “practicing” Catholic to be his wife.

### **Difficult Choices**

As it is the largest town near Vichy, the renown of Clermont-Ferrand lies not only in its specific geographic position, but also in its lack of a particular political “position” during the Occupation. According to Sweets, the close proximity of Clermont-Ferrand to France’s wartime capital meant the city was “most subject to all the pressure that could be brought to bear by handpicked followers of the government” (viii). Although Ophüls’s documentary is criticized by many, including Sweets, as being a misrepresentation of French history, with examples chosen for “dramatic or entertainment value,” *Le Chagrin et la pitié* does underscore the moral ambiguity at the heart of the collaborationist regime (ix). The residents of Clermont-Ferrand were faced, perhaps more directly than was the populace anywhere else in France during the Occupation, with the moral dilemma of choosing between Premier Philippe Pétain’s “collaboration” with



the Nazi forces and Général de Gaulle's "resistance" to them. Ophüls's interviews with residents reveal that many were incapable of making such a choice.

The atmosphere of moral indecision that permeated Clermont-Ferrand during the Occupation inflects Rohmer's literary tale and perhaps even more his film, *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, in which choice is displaced from the political to moral terrain. Moral ambiguity is at the heart of Rohmer's tale, which addresses, according to James Monaco, "a classic philosophical problem: the ethics of choice" (294-295). Monaco elaborates to explain, "Rohmer's men choose not to choose, but the essential paralysis is moot since they prefer to emphasize the possibility of choice rather than the activity of it" (295). In *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, Trintignant must choose between two women; the choice itself becomes the focus of the plot. Jean-Paul Sartre explains the ethics of choice in his article "Pour un théâtre de situations"/"For a Theater of Situations." First published in *La Rue*, November 1947, Sartre asserts, "But if it's true that man is free in a given situation and that in and through that situation he chooses what he will be, then what we have to show in the theater are simple and human situations and free individuals in these situations choosing what they will be" (4). Sartre explains that, "The most moving thing the theater can show is a character creating himself, the moment of choice, of the free decision which commits him to a moral code and a whole way of life" (4). If the moment of choice results in the creation of self, then it seems probable that infinite indecision leads to the destruction of self. The ethics of choice is echoed in *Le Chagrin et la pitié*, in which interviewees had been forced during the war to choose between two political grounds. Indeed, choice itself becomes the focus of Ophüls's documentary. *Ma Nuit chez Maud* also invokes the ethics of choice, but in quite a different context. Ultimately, Monaco concludes that, "part of

Rohmer's comic genius is that he makes us understand the humor of our rationalizations and excuses" (295). However, in the shadow of an occupied Clermont-Ferrand, it seems Rohmer is not only suggesting the humor of indecision and rationalization, but also he is hinting at the darker motivations and consequences of "our rationalizations and excuses" (Monaco 295).

### **The Pursuit of an Image: Following Françoise**

Throughout *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, the male protagonist, Trintignant, looks at women as would a fascist. As the Nazis objectified France and reduced it to a new territory to obtain in their conquest of Europe, so too does Trintignant attempt to objectify Françoise and reduce her to a blonde Catholic to obtain in his pursuit of a wife. However, to a certain degree, Trintignant is unsuccessful in his attempt. In fact, Trintignant is less like the Nazis and more like the puppet fascists of Vichy. As a displaced, nameless man, who becomes a locus of ambiguity, Trintignant is incapable of fully possessing Françoise. As Vichy was a pseudo nation-state lacking autonomy and power, so too is Trintignant disempowered.

The first time we see Françoise is during Sunday mass at the cathedral. Initially, it seems that we are viewing her through the eyes of Trintignant. However, the first shot of her is actually one of the few images of Françoise that escapes what Laura Mulvey identifies in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" as Trintignant's "gaze." Indeed, Rohmer's editing reveals that the first image of Françoise is not a point of view shot. Trintignant is looking toward the priest the first time we, the film spectators, see Françoise. However, the second time we see Françoise, only moments later, it is made clear that it is a point of view shot from Trintignant's perspective. Françoise glances

toward the camera and thus toward him in a meager effort to return his gaze, but she quickly looks away again. She is unable to return his gaze. She has been stripped of control; she is powerless before him and film spectators alike.

Françoise attempts to evade the oppressive nature of the gaze, and thus she remains only a visual representation of Trintignant's needs and desires. He projects onto her his vision of a perfect wife: blonde and Catholic. Françoise is neither a body, nor a soul, nor ultimately a real woman. She is an image, an image to provide psychic pleasure, like a moral placebo. Ultimately, Françoise's image invokes that of the Virgin Mary, Catholicism's image of female perfection. As the virgin, Françoise becomes not only an object to pursue, but also an ideal to achieve.

Trintignant not only pursues Françoise psychically, he physically pursues her. After Sunday mass, we find ourselves in Trintignant's car. The camera is situated over his shoulder. We see only his hands on the steering wheel and his eyes in the rearview mirror, reminding us that he still controls the gaze. As the car travels through the narrow streets of Clermont-Ferrand, we follow Françoise on her motorbike. She remains trapped in the gaze. When we momentarily lose sight of her, however, the camera moves back slightly to reveal more of Trintignant's body. We now see his shoulders, and as he turns his head from side to side, frantically searching for Françoise, we also see the profile of his face. Seeing parts of his body and face seems to signify Trintignant's loss of visual power to "place" Françoise's image, leaving him in a vulnerable position. When Françoise escapes his gaze, she escapes our gaze. We, as film spectators, are thus able to momentarily attribute the obsessive gaze to him.

Watching Trintignant follow the blonde Françoise, a woman who is a complete unknown, a mere image, we are reminded of a similar scenario from a film by one of Rohmer's favorite directors, Alfred Hitchcock.<sup>4</sup> Given Rohmer's interest in the moral qualities of Hitchcock's films, it is little surprise to discover echoes of *Vertigo* (1958) in Rohmer's own moral tale, *Ma Nuit chez Maud*. There are several similarities between Madeleine in *Vertigo* and Françoise in *Ma Nuit chez Maud*. Both are women trapped in the gaze of not only their respective film's male protagonist, but also our gaze as film spectators. In addition, not only are both women mere images on which our eyes gaze through the "skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure," but also they exist as blank canvases to the male protagonists of the films, on which these men project their own needs and desires (Mulvey 36). Both women are also associated with the divine. Trintignant first sees Françoise in the cathedral, reciting the Lord's Prayer, while *Vertigo*'s Scottie spies Madeleine for the first time in a seemingly secular location, a restaurant called Eddie's. Madeleine's profile, however, is enveloped by a soft, angelic glow, a halo of sorts. Both women are also physically pursued by their film's male protagonist. Trintignant follows Françoise on her motorbike through the narrow streets of Clermont-Ferrand, as Scottie tails Madeleine in her car up and down the hilly avenues of San Francisco. Finally, not only are both women blonde, but also each woman has a brunette double. The brunette double of Françoise is Maud, while Madeleine's brunette double is, in fact, her "true" identity, Judy Barton. While Françoise and Madeleine are

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<sup>4</sup> According to translator Stanley Hochman, in his introductory note to the English translation of *Hitchcock: The First Forty-Four Films*, "In 1957, two brilliant contributors to France's influential *Cahiers du Cinéma*, who were themselves soon to become film directors of international status, [Eric Rohmer and New Wave colleague, Claude Chabrol], published the first book-length study of Alfred Hitchcock" (vii). The translator's note from Hochman also includes a quote from film critic Robin Wood, who wrote in 1966, "(T)heir book on Hitchcock constitutes a very serious attempt to account for the resonances his films can evoke in the mind. One admires its many brilliant perceptions and the authors' interest in the moral qualities of Hitchcock's films" (vii).

portrayed as holy or divine, even virginal in the case of Françoise, their brunette doubles are depicted as the forbidden fruit, the embodiment of man's greatest temptation.

Conversely, unlike their blonde counterparts, who exist only in the visual realm, the enticing brunettes exist not merely as images, but rather as "words," through speech and dialogue, and thus, initially, choose not to succumb to the oppression of the male gaze to which Françoise and Madeleine are subject. The gendered perspective that exists in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* becomes politicized when Rohmer joins it to the subtext of fascism in Vichy France, which runs throughout *Ma Nuit chez Maud*.

Shortly after the initial pursuit of Françoise, Trintignant is driving through Clermont-Ferrand once more – this time at night – when he spots her on the motorbike again. The darkness of night seems to make it more difficult for him to subject Françoise to his gaze. Perhaps this is the reason Rohmer offers the use of a voiceover to his main character, to help reinforce his authority in the film. It is the first of only two voiceovers in the film, both wielded by the main character. The second is not heard until the concluding lines of the film. Here, however, we hear the main character say, "On that Monday, the 21<sup>st</sup> December... I suddenly knew, without a doubt, that Françoise would be my wife." Just as he finishes saying this, Françoise enters the frame on her motorbike, passing Trintignant in his car. We hear him honk the car horn at her, and as in the first scene at the cathedral, Françoise turns her head, momentarily glancing at the camera, and thus at him, before she hastily turns away again. She drives on and out of the frame, more quickly than she entered, as if attempting to escape his gaze. Now that Trintignant controls both the gaze and the voiceover narration that deems Françoise as forever his, he

is marked as the all-powerful protagonist, while Françoise remains a visual phantom, voiceless and powerless.

### **In the Literary Realm: The Night at Maud's**

While Françoise exists only as a phantom, an image, Maud exists as something more substantial. Maud exists more as a voice than an image. In the influence of the words she uses and the ideas she discusses, not only is Maud capable of eluding Trintignant's gaze, but also she is able to prevail over the authority of his voice. Unlike Françoise, Maud cannot be reduced to her appearance, because Maud exists in the literary realm.

From the moment we meet Maud, her command of language, as well as her skill in the art of conversation is evident. Upon welcoming Trintignant and Vidal into her apartment, she immediately takes control of the situation and likewise the conversation. She invites them to sit and quickly begins asking questions about their meeting after fourteen years. When they agree that the other has not changed a bit, Maud describes the two men as, "two cases of protracted adolescence." When Vidal asks if this is a compliment or a criticism, Maud replies quickly, "Neither, an observation." It is evident by her insights and witticisms that Maud is not only a clever wordsmith, but also an influential voice with a commanding presence.

Throughout the evening, Maud is associated with the literary realm. At dinner with Trintignant and Vidal, she alone is sitting in front of a bookcase, loaded with books. As the three friends converse, the subject of Pascal emerges. When Vidal asks Maud if she is familiar with the writer, Maud shrugs, "Yeah, yeah...Man is a thinking reed...the two infinities...Not my favorite author." Her nonchalance and distaste for Pascal seems

to set Maud above the philosopher. Her confident, critical attitude toward his work presents Maud as an authority figure, a person of power. As Maud is increasingly presented as a commanding character, Trintignant's authority slowly erodes. He tries to add to the conversation, explaining that he does not like "Pascal's idiosyncratic perception of Christianity," but Vidal interrupts him. Because of Vidal's candid rapport with Maud, Trintignant is unable to compete with Vidal in the conversation. Trintignant abandons his point and concentrates on eating. The camera rests on him, subjecting him to the gaze of film spectators now that he has lost his voice, his authority. The moment is similar to Trintignant's momentary loss of power as he followed Françoise through the streets of Clermont-Ferrand and briefly lost sight of her. The camera had pulled back to reveal more of his body and face to allow us to transfer our objectifying gaze from Françoise to him. Now in Maud's apartment, he eats in silence, stripped of his voice and relinquished of his power. It is Maud who finally quiets Vidal and invites Trintignant back into the conversation. As the camera rests on him, Maud's voice, inviting him to continue speaking, is heard off camera. Maud, who exists in the literary realm, will not be subjected to the gaze.

Meanwhile, it seems Trintignant finds it difficult to regain his authority in Maud's presence. After she invites him to continue speaking, he finds himself nearly speechless. Stripped of control and subjected to the harsh gaze of a now omniscient camera, he responds meekly to Maud's invitation to speak, mumbling, "nothing." Eventually, however, he does contribute to the conversation about Pascal. After Vidal finds a copy of Pascal's *Pensées* on Maud's bookshelf, he reads aloud the section that describes Pascal's famous theory of the "wager." From Pascal's "Discourse Concerning the Machine," the

wager states, “Let us weigh up the gain and the loss by calling heads that God exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win, you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager that he exists then, without hesitating!” (154). Trintignant declares that he does not like the “lottery” aspect of Pascal, to which Vidal replies, “Call it a choice, rather, between the finite and the infinite.”

However, like the residents of the occupied Clermont-Ferrand during World War II, whose loss of power was marked, not by the occupation itself, but by the simple inability to *choose* between collaboration and resistance, so too does Trintignant’s loss of power during his night at Maud’s seem to entail the loss of his ability to choose, to make a decision between Maud and Françoise. At the opening of the film, he was certain of his future. He knew, without a doubt, that he would make Françoise his wife. Now he wavers. He is unable to choose between his future with Françoise and his one night with Maud, between the blonde and the brunette, the image and the literary. Monaco explains that, “None of [Rohmer’s] male characters really have the strength to choose” (295). Trintignant’s inability to choose between these two women and what they represent is comparable to Rohmer’s dual desire for both the image and the literary.

## **Conclusion**

In his film, *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, Rohmer uses intertextual and extratextual references to create irony. The subtle irony of Rohmer’s film is not only a stylistic device, but also a tool that engages the crucial “element of duality” to highlight the layers of duplicity that run through *Ma Nuit chez Maud* (Barbe 62). That is to say, the difficult choices faced by the residents of Vichy France inflect our reading of Trintignant’s



choices, which we perceive as ironic. Vichy's manipulation of religious ideals renders Trintignant's hypocritical approach to Catholic doctrine ironic.

Like Trintignant, who finds himself stripped of power as he struggles to choose between Françoise and Maud, the image and the literary, Rohmer struggles to decide whether to become a filmmaker or a writer, and finds himself unable to choose. In 1966, three years before *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, Rohmer expresses a desire "to pierce the external shell of things," to infiltrate the "stark image," and to explore the "internal world" (Crisp 11). During an interview in 1971, two years after the success of the film, Rohmer finishes the sentiment:

In the realm of pure plastic expression, the portrayal of action, and even the presentation of life, the cinema has done wonders; but it has proved pretty restricting when it comes to portraying reflection, a character's developing awareness of himself, which is the subject of not only of most French but also Anglo-Saxon literature, which is as moralizing as ours. Purely visual cinema was incapable of exploring this realm. (Crisp 12)

Desiring to create a new cinema, Rohmer uses the moral tale as a literary model for each of the films in *Six contes moraux*. Rohmer reworks the basic narrative of F. W. Murnau's Hollywood silent classic, *Sunrise*, not only to restore the moral complexity of Sudermann's original tale, but also to portray reflection. As the moral tale was a light literary platform to delve into heavy subjects and important issues in the late eighteenth century, Rohmer's *Ma Nuit chez Maud* cites literature, such as Pascal's *Pensées*, to explore significant issues, including the ethics of choice and Catholicism in Vichy France. Using the literary realm to give depth to the cinematic realm of "pure plastic expression," Rohmer not only reveals Trintignant's developing awareness of himself in *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, but also exposes his own developing awareness of himself as a filmmaker, all the while asking his "double (voiced) question" (as literary author and

filmmaker), “Why film a story when one can write it? Why write it when one is going to film it?” (*Six Moral Tales* v).

## Chapter Two: The Novella: *La Marquise d'O...*

Que ce texte fût de moi-même ou d'un autre, je répugnais à n'être que son servent et, en ce cas, j'eusse encore préféré me dévouer à une cause étrangère plutôt que mon propre.

(8)

That the text was mine rather than someone else's, made no difference: I resented that I was but the servant of that script, and decided that if that were the case, I would prefer to devote my time and effort to someone else's creation rather than my own. (vi)

-Eric Rohmer, *Avant-propos*, Preface, *Six contes moraux* (1974)

Following his initial intertextual exploration of adaptation in *Six contes moraux*, Rohmer chooses to fully respect the authority of the sole author, Heinrich von Kleist, of *Die Marquise von O...*/*The Marquise of O...* in his film, *La Marquise d'O...*/*The Marquise of O...* (1976). In the case of *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, it is difficult to know which came first, the literary tale or the film. With Rohmer as both literary author and filmmaker, there is a sense of reciprocity between the literary and film texts. However, in the case of *La Marquise d'O...*, Rohmer dissolves his name as literary author to focus on adapting, or "actualizing" Kleist's novella ("Notes on the Direction" 7). It is remarkable that in the preface to his collection of self-authored short stories, *Six contes moraux*, Rohmer is already prepared to devote himself to "someone else's creation" (vi). Furthermore, in the original French version of this statement, Rohmer declares that he would prefer to devote his time and effort to "une cause étrangère," literally translated as "a foreign cause" (8). Perhaps this is why Rohmer not only devotes himself to "someone else's creation," but specifically to Kleist's German novella, the original language of which Rohmer chooses to honour in his film.<sup>5</sup>

In remarks written before the film, *La Marquise d'O...*, was made, Rohmer claims that, "Instead of being, as is too often the case, a struggle against a resistant material, this

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<sup>5</sup> Alan Spiegel relates that Rohmer "spent four years learning German in order to film the text in its original language with a cast of German actors" (126).

time the cinematic transposition takes place of its own accord” (“Notes on the Direction” 7). Rohmer explains that Kleist’s text was not only an ideal “subject” for a film, but also already a “veritable ‘scenario’” (“Notes on the Direction” 7). Rohmer asserts that Kleist is more adept than “the most careful screenwriter”:

Kleist...informs us with the greatest precision of the postures, movements, and expressions of his protagonists. At any given moment we know if a character is standing, sitting, or kneeling, if he or she is embracing the other, taking him or her by the hand, looking at him or her, or turning away. (“Notes on the Direction” 7-8)

Rohmer admits that his “guiding principle” in adapting the novella was to follow Kleist’s text “word for word” and to maintain the “archaism of a given expression, whether of word, gesture or acting style” (“Notes on the Direction” 7-9). Dalle Vacche describes Rohmer’s devotion to the “word” of Kleist:

In Rohmer’s *Marquise of O*, the word calls attention to itself, instead of simply functioning as a source or goal for the image. One factor in this exhibition of the word was the director’s decision to shoot the film in German, which made Rohmer especially sensitive to sound, shape, and rhythm of a foreign language. Furthermore, he cast professional German theater actors, who could most skillfully carry the weight of a literary text and gratify Rohmer’s taste for ethnography of conversation and a cinema through which ‘to explore how we live in relation to how we speak, who we are in relation to what we say’. (85-86)

The “word” in Rohmer’s film is not only foreign to French audiences but also to German speakers. The film consciously preserves the historical, stilted German of Kleist’s novella, a language that Germans might be prepared to read in the pages of an old text, but which is strange for them to hear as the spoken language of a film. In a similar way, Rohmer rejects a modern reading, or interpretation, of Kleist’s text and maintains instead a historical reading of the eighteenth century novella.

Calling attention to the word, Rohmer uses the structural elements of the novella, a literary form of German origin, to inspire his cinematic portrayal of Kleist’s *The*

*Marquise of O...* Indeed, in adapting Kleist's novella, Rohmer not only devotes himself to "someone else's creation," but also to "a foreign cause" (vi).

### The Novella

To better comprehend the foreign work that is *La Marquise d'O...*, it is necessary to first explore the history and development of the German novella, the origins of which some scholars trace back to Boccaccio's *Decamerone* (1348-53) (Remak 276). However, Katherine Astbury argues that the German novella emerged at the end of the eighteenth century from the German moral tale, Germany's counterpart to the French moral tale. The German novella is also a literary form that, like the French moral tale, addresses social mores and morality, but which also has its own unique structure.<sup>6</sup>

Because it is ambiguously "short," we might be tempted to consider the novella a "light" literary form. However, the brevity of the literary form serves only to heighten the intensity of its subject matter. In *Structural Elements of the German Novella from Goethe to Thomas Mann*, Henry H. H. Remak remarks on the "legendary precision of the language of the novella," and adds that, "The more charged the events, the more disciplined their representation" (Remak 7, 25). In *Memory and Desire: Representation of Passion in the Novella*, Peter Mudford explains the concision of the novella:

...novellas are not concerned with the whole of life, with the evolution of the individual, but with the transforming effect on particular lives of extreme states of feeling. We do not see the whole life, we see that part of it where a crucial and unredeemable event has occurred: an event which defines the quality of a particular life. (26)

The novella must achieve compression without sacrificing quality. In addition, while the novella cannot provide a "spacious documentation" of the social world, the central event

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<sup>6</sup> In this section, I refer to the "moral tale" as a specific literary form, contrasting it with the "novella," another specific literary form. Kleist's *The Marquise of O...* is a tale of morals, but structurally, it is a novella.

of a novella can, and often does, challenge prejudices, social standards, and norms of behaviour (Mudford 25).

The novella appears similar to the French moral tale, which, as discussed in Chapter One, expresses enlightened ideas about injustice, women in society and social and economic class divisions. Indeed, Astbury argues that the French moral tale was a precursor to the German novella, asserting that, “The overwhelming quantity of moral tales produced in France had a considerable impact on German literature” (4). Astbury elaborates:

Germany was in a position of literary inferiority to France in the 1750s and 1760s and only gradually did German writers develop their own form of literature, their own form of the moral tale. The intellectual communities of the two countries shared enlightened views that crossed national borders and...the German moral tale develop[ed] from the French sources [...] [into] its own distinct national form. (3)

When the moral tale thus arrived in Germany in the late eighteenth century, German authors moulded the form into something distinctly German. The German moral tale (*moralische Erzählung*) began to use “frameworks, objective observers, and varied narrative devices,” including “small, insignificant events [that] have great consequences” (Astbury 176). Astbury asserts that, furthermore, Friedrich Schiller’s “manipulation of narrative structures to break the traditional polarized division of right and wrong [was] a first stage in the development of the *Novelle*” (176). As German authors further developed the structure of the novella, the depolarization of right and wrong became an increasingly important element. Remak declares that, “The (particularly German) novella must continue to guard against moralizing, ...theorizing, melodramatic wallowing in sentiment, and lyric expansionism, against wordiness, excessive of learnedness, and psychological implausibilities” (280). Ultimately, Astbury suggests that, “The moral tale

had always shown the reader the author's preferred viewpoint, how to read the message; [however] from the 1790s onwards, the reading public was sophisticated enough to interpret the story for itself" (182). By the nineteenth century, the moral tale from France had become the novella, "the predominant fictional form in Germany, provoking debate and commentary which continues to the present day" (Mudford 23).

The beginning of the German novella, and its specific structure, is attributed to Goethe in 1795 (Astbury 4). Goethe was among the first to identify the specific ingredients of the novella, including the "unprecedented happening" (*unerhörte eigenes*) (Mudford 23). Mudford explains that, "The *novella* tells a story about the world as we know it; it is embedded in that world; but the central event has about it something unprecedented and new" (23). Goethe's contemporaries soon added more requirements to the structure of the novella, including Ludwig Tieck's "turning point" (*Wendepunkt*) (Mudford 23). Mudford describes the turning point as, "something which could easily happen, was not in any way fantastic, but at the same time challenged accepted definitions of reality and involved something that was wonderful and unique" (23). As is evident, much emphasis is placed not only on the content of a novella, but also on its very structure.

The emphasis on structure is a distinctive difference between the novella and the moral tale. In the eighteenth century, the importance of the French moral tale was as "a vehicle for social comment" (Astbury 95.) Less concerned with a specific structure than subject matter, "Authors [of the moral tale] became increasingly concerned with revealing inequality and injustice within society and it is possible to see the moral tale's emphasis on humanity and on merit above rank and wealth as 'possessing real social

referents and historical meanings” (Astbury 95.) Placed in cultural and historical context, the moral tale’s emphasis on social morality reflects its position within an Enlightenment tradition during the onset of the French Revolution. Germany would not see its own revolution until the 1840s.<sup>7</sup> At the end of the eighteenth century, German writers honed the structure of the conventional moral tale, gradually creating a new literary form, the novella. Astbury confirms that by the 1790s, few moral tales were written in Germany, because “writers had already passed beyond the form by then” (177). Both the moral tale and the novella address social morality. The novella, however, expresses ideas within a very specific structure.

Although scholar Walter Pabst defines the novella merely as a “story of medium length,” most scholars, including Goethe and Tieck, Remak and Mudford, insist that certain elements must be present for a novella to earn the classification (Remak 17). Remak’s working hypothesis of the “structural characteristics of the novella” include the “unheard-of, extraordinary occurrence,” “novelty” (or something “newsworthy”), “object symbols,” “report, not justification,” “matter-of-factness” (or “distance”), “tension,” “crisis,” “crucial turning points,” and finally, the “ultimate, frequently ironic twist, often in the last or penultimate sentence of the final paragraph, suggesting...an unexpected, strikingly and tersely formulated new angle...a thoughtful teaser that offers...stimulation for retroactive hypotheses” (2). Remak insists that the novella “does not at all exclude an evaluation of ideas but sets artistic limits to it. Beyond those limits the tale is no longer a novella” (17). However, despite the emphasis on structure, Remak declares that,

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<sup>7</sup> Although revolution came to Germany later, revolutionary ideals were certainly topical in Germany during the years of the French revolution. Kleist himself was a revolutionary. Perhaps this is why *The Marquise of O...* is set in the midst of a contemporary war.



“the novella is better suited than any other literary form to be a bridge between content and form, idea and art, history and interpretation” (17).

Not only does Kleist's *The Marquise of O...* meet all of the structural criteria of a novella, but also and moreover it exemplifies novella form and style. However, Remak remarks that, “the greatest novellas of German literature, Kleist's, were not published as novellas but as tales – ‘Erzählungen’” (23). That Kleist's stories were not originally deemed novellas indicates that, “The decisive factor is not under what label a story has been launched but what it *is*” (Remak 23). *The Marquise of O...* is a novella; it contains nearly all the structural elements of a novella. For example, the “unheard-of, extraordinary occurrence” is that the Marquise, a respectable bourgeois widow becomes inexplicably pregnant. The “novelty,” or “newsworthy” aspect of the story is the Marquise's advertisement for the child's unknown father, which opens Kleist's tale. Remak points out that, “What a novella relates must be unique, or at least very striking, but realistic...Here the novella comes close to the journalistic news story, and it is by no means accidental that two of the finest novellas, Kleist's *Marquise von O...* (1810-1811) and Keller's *Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorf* (1856)...are (in fact or allegedly) based on newspaper stories” (277). Kleist's ellipses, such as the town of M..., Count F..., and the Marquise of O..., as well as his introductory note that states, “Based on a true incident, the setting of which has been transposed from the north to the south,” also create the ambiance of a newspaper story. Linda Dietrick, in *Prisons and Idylls: Studies in Heinrich von Kleist's Fictional World*, notes that, “Kleist's ellipses and note are evidently devices, typical of the period, for making the story seem more ‘real’ by purporting to protect the privacy of actual persons” (60). This novellesque quality may have appealed to Rohmer

as a filmmaker from the New Wave, a film movement that embraced the “fait divers,” perhaps translated best as “news story.” The “fait divers” inspired many New Wave filmmakers and films, including Rohmer’s colleagues, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Rivette, and Jean-Luc Godard.

The “report[ing]” of *The Marquise of O...* without “justification,” but rather with “matter-of-factness” and “distance” (creating “tension”) is evident in the impartiality of the narrator, which is noted in particular by Rohmer:

...the narrator has carefully avoided all mention of the intimate thoughts of the protagonists. Everything is described from the exterior, contemplated with the impassiveness of a movie camera. The motivations of the characters can only be fathomed by means of the painting of their behavior. Film in this case is not at a disadvantage compared with the original novel because the latter never makes use of its power of introspection. (“Notes on the Direction” 8)

Remak explains that the novella conveys events rather than “subjective interpretation or preaching” (278). He adds that, “Like a good newspaper reporter the novella author ‘reports’ as facts only what he ‘knows’, what has been ‘verified’, and that very soberly, precisely,” allowing the reader to “fill in the gaps and thus become the co-creator of the novella” (3). Remak concludes that, “The combination of firmness and openness is one of the strongest contributing factors to the efficacy of the genre” (3).

The “crisis” of Kleist’s story is not only the Marquise’s pregnancy by an unknown man, but also the rejection of the Marquise by her family and greater bourgeois society. Novellesque structure often includes upper bourgeois elements. Mudford, reiterating remarks made by A.W. Schlegel, one of Goethe’s contemporaries, adds that, “the novelle recounts remarkable events that have, as it were, occurred behind the back of the bourgeois conventions and regulations” (23). Mudford adds that, “the restraints of social order are challenged by experiences which cannot contain them” (26).

The “crucial turning points” include the Count’s rescue of the Marquise, the Count’s return from apparent death, the Count’s sudden proposal of marriage, the Marquise’s acceptance of her pregnancy as a gift from God, and the family’s final acknowledgement of the Marquise’s purity and innocence. Finally, the “ultimate...ironic twist” is that the Marquise’s “saviour,” the Count, is the same fiend who takes advantage of her. The irony is perhaps best expressed by the Marquise herself in the last line of Kleist’s text: “...she threw her arms around his neck and said: he wouldn’t have looked like a devil to her then if he had not seemed like an angel to her at his first appearance” (Kleist 124). Rohmer’s film capitalizes on the novellesque elements of Kleist’s original text, including the objective “distance” of the narrator, which becomes, in most scenes, the impassiveness of Rohmer’s movie camera, “which can only record what goes on externally” (Dalle Vacche 86). Rohmer’s film also preserves the irony of Kleist’s novella by rejecting a modern interpretation, as well as avoiding a sensational representation, of Kleist’s text. Ultimately, Rohmer’s *La Marquise d’O...* follows Kleist’s narrative closely with only a few, albeit significant, exceptions.

### **Narrative Differences**

Kleist’s novella is set in eighteenth century Italy during the Franco-Prussian War. In the midst of a battle, the Marquise, daughter of the Commandant, is saved from an attempted rape by a Russian Count. However, she mysteriously finds herself pregnant six months later. Unable to explain her pregnancy, the Marquise, disgraced, is sent away by her family, forced at gunpoint by her own father to leave the family home. When the Marquise is able to prove her innocence, however, she is reunited with her family. In the meantime, the Count proposes marriage, but the Marquise refuses. She is determined to

discover the identity of her child's father and marry him for the sake of her child's honour. She places an ad in the local gazette, announcing her predicament and requesting the child's father to come forward. When the Count answers the ad, the Marquise is outraged, but her family quickly persuades her to marry him. Finally, at the baptism of their child, the Marquise, now the Countess, and the Count are reconciled.

Rohmer's film follows Kleist's narrative nearly "word for word" ("Notes on the Direction" 7). However, there are several differences between the novella and the film, including the treatment of the Count's attack on the Marquise's aggressors, as well as Rohmer's omission of most of the battle scenes from Kleist's text. The most significant narrative difference, however, between the novella and the film, is the treatment of the Marquise's rape by the Count. In Kleist's novella, a single dash (-), accompanied by a fainting fit, indicates the nature of the Count's illicit sexual encounter with the Marquise. In Rohmer's film, however, there is neither a cinematic ellipsis, nor a fainting fit. Instead, the Marquise succumbs to a drugged sleep after drinking a poppy seed tea given to her by a female servant of the family. Hours after the battle for the citadel has ended and the commandant has surrendered, the Count observes the unconscious Marquise. Rohmer's camera positions the Marquise in the Count's gaze, attributing the subsequent moral transgression, the rape, to him.

To explore the literariness in Rohmer's *La Marquise d'O...*, we will first examine the differences between Kleist's and Rohmer's treatment of the Count's attack on the Marquise's aggressors, as well as the omitted battle scenes from Kleist's text in Rohmer's film. Finally, we will explore the scholarly inquiry into the meaning and intention of

Kleist's remarkable dash (-), followed by an analysis of Rohmer's unique "solution" to Kleist's literary device of ellipsis.

### **Attack on the Marquise and the Battle for the Citadel**

In the opening scenes of Rohmer's film, as the Russian soldiers open fire on the citadel, the Marquise and her children, along with her mother and a handful of servants, attempt to flee to the cellar of the fortress. In the courtyard of the citadel, however, they encounter a band of enemy riflemen, and the frightened group scatters. The Marquise, suddenly isolated, is subsequently seized by the men and wrestled to the ground.

Where Kleist's text provides a vivid description of the scene, such as "the flashing of a canon in violent action lit up the night," the *mise-en-scène* of Rohmer's film is surprisingly dark and quiet (Kleist 82). In the film, only a frightened scream from the Marquise pierces the silence as she is seized by one of the brutes. Her flowing white dress stands out against the blackness of the night, her innocence and purity against the soldiers' darkness and depravity. As the men grab at her and force her to the ground, the camera rests in its position, distant from the action. Rohmer resists cutting the scene with quick close ups, which would heighten the intensity of the action. Instead, the camera remains still, at medium distance from the struggle and unaccompanied by a musical score, thus lessening the emotional impact of the scene. We hear only the quiet grunting of the men. Furthermore, ash, evidently from the burning citadel, blows across the frame, making it nearly impossible to see the struggle. Suddenly, we hear a voice from off-screen, shout, "You Dogs!" The ash clears for a moment, and we can see the group of men stop and look up. We specifically see the Marquise's face, positioned in the centre of the frame, as she lifts her head toward the voice. Everyone and everything is silent as

Rohmer cuts to a low angle shot of the Count standing on a high wall in a flowing white cape, his hair blowing in the wind. Although the film's portrayal of the Count's rescue is, in many ways, more subdued than Kleist's colourful description of events, both film and text depict the Count, at first, "as an angel from heaven" (Kleist 83).

As the Count leaps from the wall to come to the Marquise's aid, however, Rohmer's restrained representation of the rescue departs, once again, from the graphic account in Kleist's text. In the novella, the Count, "smashed the last of the murderous brutes, whose arms were wrapped around her slender figure, in the face with the hilt of his sword and made him reel back with the blood gushing from his mouth" (83). In Rohmer's film, however, we see no murderous brute, no sword hilt, and no blood gushing from the mouth. Instead, the Count stands with his back to the camera. His broad white cape blocks our vision of the attack. We hear a man cry out as he is apparently stabbed, or perhaps "smashed," by the Count, but Rohmer never cuts to the action. We hear only a faint clanking sound of metal against metal as the Count resheathes his sword. The camera pans down slightly to reveal the Marquise curled up in the bottom corner of the frame. The Count reaches down to her and helps the Marquise to her feet, asking politely, "Madame, may I offer you my arm?" She obliges his request, and he leads her out of the frame.

Rohmer's decision to restrain the portrayal of the attack on the Marquise and the Count's attack on her aggressors, stems from his desire to maintain the literary tenants of *novellesque* structure, to maintain the "distance" of the narrator through the impassiveness of the camera and "to guard against moralizing, ...theorizing, melodramatic wallowing in sentiment, and lyric expansionism, against wordiness,

excessive of learnedness, and psychological implausibilities” (Remak 280). Kleist’s murderous brute, sword hilt, and bloody mouth, are expressed through the abstract medium of language. Kleist includes the violent description to underline the irony of the Count’s dual nature. In one phrase, the Count “smashed the last of the murderous brutes...in the face with the hilt of his sword, and made him reel back with the blood gushing from his mouth; then saluting her courteously in French, he offered her his arm” (Kleist 83). Film scholar Alan Spiegel remarks that, “the distance here between violence and civility pivots around a semicolon,” (131). The immediate contrast offers insight into the Count’s dual intention to both protect and ravish the Marquise. Rohmer, however, must portray the same events on film, a “hybrid medium,” according to Spiegel, “that seems to push out in so many different aesthetic directions (literary, theatrical, plastic, photographic) at once” (128). Rohmer organizes his film around the aesthetic of the literary. To give blood and violence visual representation in a film devoted to the archaic, stilted “word” of Kleist would appear gratuitous and melodramatic. The violent image would overwhelm the subtle irony of Kleist’s text. Rohmer, who desires a cinema that portrays “reflection,” thus offers little visual attention to the violence of the narrative to keep his work from becoming a film of “pure plastic expression,” as well as to remain faithful to the spirit of the novella and novellesque structure.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps for similar reasons, Rohmer also omits the battle scenes from Kleist’s novella in his film. In Kleist’s text, after restoring the Marquise to the safety of the house servants, the Count returns to the battle for the citadel:

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<sup>8</sup> As discussed in the Introduction and Chapter One, Rohmer expresses that cinema has done wonders in the realm of “pure plastic expression,” but in all his films, he wishes to portray reflection, “a character’s developing awareness of himself” (Crisp 11-12).

...he placed himself hurriedly at the head of a detachment, threw his force into the fighting wherever it was still in doubt. No sooner was this done than he ran back to the drill square and ordered his men to battle the roaring flames which were threatening to spread in every direction, himself performing prodigies of exertion when his orders were not carried out with the necessary zeal. One minute he was scrambling among the burning gables, hose in hand, aiming the stream of water at the flames, the next minute he had darted into the magazines and, striking terror to the souls of his fellow Asiatics, was rolling out powder kegs and live grenades. (83-84)

Rohmer's film omits the scene entirely. There are no roaring flames or burning gables.

The Count does not dart into magazines, nor does he roll out powder kegs and live grenades. Rohmer possibly excludes the battle scene for the same reasons that he restrains his portrayal of the two preceding scenes, essentially to avoid sensational representation in keeping with the dictates of his own filmmaking practice, as well as the spirit of novella structure. However, Rohmer is further motivated to omit the scene due to the changes he made concerning the circumstances of the Marquise's rape. In Kleist's text, the battle scene takes place after the Count allegedly rapes the Marquise.

Consequently, in lieu of a graphic description of the sexual encounter, Kleist describes the battle scene with sensual imagery and sexual metaphor. The fiery imagery hints at the Count's sensuality. The fires that burn within the citadel represent the fires that burn within the Count, while exploding kegs and live grenades suggest the Count's sexual prowess. In Rohmer's film, however, the sexual encounter between the Count and the Marquise does not take place until after the battle is over. Thus, not only would a filmic display of "prodigies of exertion" and "burning gables" seem, once again, sensational and gratuitous, but also we might be inclined to excuse the Count's moral transgression (Kleist 83-84). If he rapes her in the "heat" of a fiery battle, depicted by the unambiguous image of film, we might be tempted to read this amoral action



psychologically. However, in keeping with the spirit of the *novellesque*, Rohmer guards against “psychological implausibilities” (Remak 280). Rohmer rejects a modern, psychological reading of Kleist, which we will explore further as we analyze the circumstances and consequences of the Marquise’s rape in both Kleist’s text and Rohmer’s film.

### **The Dash**

In Kleist’s text, after the Count fights off the murderous brutes, the Marquise succumbs to a fainting spell. “Then – when her terrified women appeared, he told them to call a doctor; promised them, as he put his hat on, that she would soon recover; and returned to the fray” (Kleist 83).<sup>9</sup> Here we discover Kleist’s subtle dash. While the dash is the only indication of the missing action, the description of the Count replacing his hat suggests the illicit nature of the act.

*The Marquise of O...* was first published in the journal *Phöbus* in February 1808 (Dyer 60). Denys Dyer, in *The Stories of Kleist* (1977), explains that readers were outraged to read “the story of an aristocratic lady raped whilst unconscious and her reactions to the pregnant state in which she so inexplicably finds herself” (60). That the Marquise, a paragon of virtue, was raped whilst unconscious was the accepted interpretation of Kleist’s dash for nearly one hundred years. However, the advent of the twentieth century saw Sigmund Freud introduce psychoanalysis to the world, and over time, the interpretation of Kleist’s ambiguous dash began to change.

When Freud and colleague Josef Breuer published *Studies in Hysteria* in 1895, they introduced into society the mechanisms of repression and unconscious desire.

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<sup>9</sup> In his translation of Kleist’s story, Martin Greenberg drops the dash, beginning the sentence with, “A little while after, etc.” I have restored the dash here, though the rest of the translation is Greenberg’s.

Applying psychoanalysis to Kleist's story, literary critics began to assert that the rape was an unconscious desire on the part of the Marquise. For example, Dyer suggests that, "It is always possible, if not likely, that the Marquise unconsciously wished for some such thing to happen – hence the allusion to Morpheus – and the translation of an unconscious wishdream into reality would then account for her violent reaction to the count when she discovers what he did" (76).<sup>10</sup> Some critics have gone so far as to claim that the Marquise was conscious during the sexual encounter with the Count, but that she later repressed the memory of it for shame.<sup>11</sup> Dietrick, in *Prisons and Idylls* (1985), elaborates:

Evidently the difficulty for her is not merely that she cannot remember the sexual embrace, but that she cannot remember a spatial or temporal context in which it would have been possible for a *man* to impregnate her. That she is unable to connect even the moments leading up to her faint with her later condition suggests that to recall would be just as troubling for her as the thought of actual participation in a sexual encounter. (71)

Similarly, in *The Major Works of Heinrich von Kleist* (1975), Robert E. Helbling suggests that, "Anticipating Freud, one might be tempted to say that the fainting happened after the fact and served as a convenient device for blocking out guilt through the now familiar apparatus of repression" (149). Rohmer, by contrast, rejects the modern interpretations of Kleist's story, preferring instead to restore the Marquise to virtuous morality. To "restore its true colors" on film, however, Rohmer makes a significant narrative change to Kleist's story ("Notes on the Direction" 7).

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<sup>10</sup> In both the novella and the film, when the Marquise begins to sense that she is pregnant, her mother jokes that she will be delivered of "a spirit of fantasy" (Kleist 87). The Marquise replies jokingly that, "Morpheus was the father or one of his attendant dreams" (Kleist 87).

<sup>11</sup> Kleist, one hundred years before Freud, purportedly supported this idea when he responded to a poor review in Phöbus, writing, "This novel is not for you... Unconscious! Shameless trick! She merely closed her eyes" (Dyer 60-61).

## Unseen Rape

In Rohmer's film, after fighting off her aggressors, the Count helps the Marquise to her feet and leads her to the cellar of the citadel, where the servants and her two small children are waiting for her. Embracing her children, the Marquise begins to weep. The Count stands above the Marquise, his white cape illuminated by a candle against the darkness of the cellar. He looks down at the Marquise. The camera, once again, remains still, a medium distance from the action. Rohmer does not cut the scene with a point-of-view shot from the Count, looking down on the weeping Marquise. Unlike Kleist's text, in which the Count is overcome by his desire for the Marquise in the midst of a fiery battle, where perhaps his military prowess overwhelms his sexual restraint, no cinematic device in Rohmer's film indicates the Count's desire for the Marquise in the immediate aftermath of her rescue. Instead, in the quiet darkness of the cellar, the Count merely says, "I'm going to call a doctor." A female servant off screen replies, "That won't be necessary. The Marquise only needs sleep. A sleeping potion is the best remedy." The Count takes his leave and returns to the battle. There is not one cut in the entire scene, as if to prevent any suggestion of cinematic ellipsis whereby the Count might seize the Marquise. As the Count walks up the cellar stairs, he passes Leopardo, the family's footman. Leopardo appears to be looking at the Marquise, though she is outside the frame. We hear the female servant, still off screen, as she shouts, "Leopardo!" which almost sounds like an accusation, a foreshadowing that the footman will later be insinuated as a suspect of the crime against the Marquise. However, the servant then adds, "Go get some poppy seed tea." Leopardo turns and walks up the stairs. The screen fades to black. The question of the Marquise's complicity in the sexual act with the

Count is erased. The first part of Rohmer's "solution" to Kleist's dash is the servant's poppy seed tea. Rohmer relates, "Let us hope that our solution will prevent [the film spectator] asking himself the 'how' of the matter – questions that will distract him from the real subject" ("Notes on the Direction" 10). But what is the "real subject" according to Rohmer? Unlike the psychoanalysts of the twentieth century, Rohmer does not concern himself with a modern reading of Kleist's text. Instead, the "real subject" for Rohmer is the moral dilemma of Kleist's novella. Rohmer reassigns moral responsibility solely to the Count. Rape is an amoral act. Therefore, the Count must be held responsible for his moral transgression.

The second part of Rohmer's "solution" to Kleist's dash comes after the battle. When the Count accepts the Commandant's surrender, he reassures him that he will look after the Marquise, who is out of danger, resting in the west wing of the citadel. The next scene reveals the courtyard of the citadel, later that night. A small campfire is burning in the centre of the frame. The courtyard is strewn with sleeping soldiers. The Count enters the frame from the right, illuminated by the lantern he carries. He checks on the sleeping soldiers, making his way across the courtyard, moving deeper into the frame, deeper into the darkness, until he reaches the west wing. There is a cut to the Count walking down the cellar stairs. His physical dissent foreshadows his moral dissent. The camera pans the dark room. In the darkness, we can just see the Marquise's children, sleeping peacefully, snoring softly. In the next room, however, candlelight fills the space. A point-of-view shot from the Count reveals the Marquise, lying stretched out on a makeshift bed. The bed is draped in a red cloth. The Marquise, by contrast, wears a shimmering white silk dressing gown that clings to her body. She sleeps fitfully. Her

arm hangs off the edge of the bed. Her body writhes. She breathes heavily. Her head turns from side to side. The camera, portraying the Count's gaze, remains relentlessly fixed on her body. Dalle Vacche, in *Cinema and Painting: How art is used in film*, asserts that Rohmer replaces Kleist's dash, "this empty, or at least graphically impoverished, place," with "an explicit reference to a painting, *The Nightmare* (1781) by Henry Fuseli" (89). Dalle Vacche compares the painting to the scene in Rohmer's film:

In this famous gothic fantasy, a beautiful young woman, aroused by some powerful dream, has thrown herself partly from the couch. Her attitude of extreme abandon shows that she is prey to an incubus, or an ugly little demon that squats just below her chest; meanwhile, a horse with staring, gleaming eyes transfixes her voluptuous body from behind the curtain. Likewise, [the Marquise], who has drunk a sleeping potion to calm her nerves after the attempted rape, appears in a seductive pose to the Russian count. With a lamp in his hand, he discovers her during his nightly tour of the conquered outpost. Her shimmering, white nightgown blinds the Count, whose intense gaze replaces the staring eyes of Fuseli's horse. (89)

Pascal Bonitzer further asserts that, "the invisibility of Fuseli's incubus in Rohmer's film rhymes with the ellipsis of violence in Kleist's text" (Dalle Vacche 89). When the camera finally cuts to the Count, standing motionless in the doorway, he gazes off screen, toward the Marquise. Rohmer's camera moves slowly towards him, like an accusatory finger, reassigning the blame for the amoral act to the Count. The Count tilts his head, and the screen fades to black. By placing the Count's transgression well after the action of the battle, the rape cannot be confused with a moment of passion, but rather it is recognized as a fully conscious moral transgression. In addition, by removing any question of the Marquise's complicity in the act, we can properly read the irony of Rohmer's film, which has cinematically transposed the novellesque structure of Kleist's text.

### The Novella's Ultimate Ironic Twist

By rejecting a psychoanalytical reading of Kleist's text, Rohmer portrays the literary irony of Kleist's novella. First, Kleist's text draws several parallels between the Marquise's pregnancy and the biblical virgin birth. Dyer confirms that, "Sex and violence, and the mystery of divine conception are topics that deeply engaged Kleist's attention" (63). Indeed, there are several similarities between Mary's virgin birth and the Marquise's mysterious pregnancy. Both women eventually accept that their child is a gift from God. Both women are in some way tied to a man harbouring initial misgivings about the pregnancy; and both men, after receiving an overt or subliminal message in a dream, subsequently renounce their doubts and marry their brides. Furthermore, when the midwife confirms the Marquise's pregnancy, the Marquise pulls the woman to her and asks desperately if it is possible to conceive without knowing. The midwife replies that, "with the exception of the Holy Virgin, no such thing had ever happened to any woman on this earth" (Kleist 103). Some critics have proposed that Kleist's allusions to the biblical virgin birth are meant to cast the Christian story in doubt, including C.G. Crisp in *Eric Rohmer: Realist and Moralist*, proposing that, "The Virgin Birth has become a tale of furtive rape" (76). However, it is more probable that both Kleist and Rohmer align the Marquise with the holy virgin to underscore the Marquise's unequivocal purity, particularly against the synthetic value system of her bourgeois setting. Furthermore, Dyer notes that the remark made by the midwife was added by Kleist to the 1810 version of the story, arguing that Kleist's addition was made to "make it clear that in alluding to the Virgin he was anxious to underline the fundamental purity of the Marquise, to broach the mystery of parthenogenesis, and to state, by reference to

an absolute example, the value of inner purity and integrity in a world dominated by appearances” (68).

If we accept the Marquise’s impeccable purity, we can begin to understand why she can neither initially deduce nor later accept that the Count is the father of her child. Although psychoanalysts would deem it a symptom of repression, both Kleist and Rohmer recognize the Marquise’s blind sight – her inability to recall a context, spatially or temporally, in which it may have been possible for a man to assault and impregnate her – as a symptom of virtuous morality. Herself a beacon of virtue, she simply cannot believe that the Count is at once fiend and saviour, devil and angel. Had Rohmer portrayed a psychoanalytical reading of the story, his film would have lost the novella’s ultimate ironic twist. That is to say, where is the irony in the fact that the Marquise’s very saviour is also her devil, if her unconscious wished it so?

The irony implies that the Marquise cannot accept that “good” and “bad” might live side by side in the same person, the Count. However, the irony also implies that the Marquise cannot accept that “good” and “bad” might live side by side within herself. For example, what in particular makes the Marquise so fearful when she learns of the Count’s abhorrent transgression? Even her mother and father are not so worried. In many respects, their daughter could not marry a better man. However, the Marquise is nearly inconsolable. Perhaps the Marquise, even in that moment, faced with the irrefutable truth of the Count’s past actions and his present intentions, cannot help but foresee the happy future they will have together. Her horror thus derives from the realization that she will draw happiness from the outcome of a sinful, amoral act, a notion incongruous with her inner purity and virtuosity. Her fear is guilt. The ultimate irony, then, is not merely that

the Marquise must accept the immorality of the Count, but also her own immorality in accepting his.

### **Conclusion**

Perhaps the Marquise's story dates back to the Garden of Eden, wherein the serpent comes to Eve and offers her the fruit of knowledge, which will reveal to her the awareness of good and evil. Like Eve, the Marquise is offered the gift of self-knowledge the night the Count storms the citadel and conquers both fortress and lady. From secluded widow to doting wife, we realize hers was a sad beginning when we arrive at the happy ending. As Eve discovers an awareness of right and wrong, the Marquise gains a burgeoning awareness of herself. Yet Kleist is ironic: While Eve becomes aware of the *difference* between right and wrong, the Marquise becomes aware that right and wrong live side by side in the same person. Her saviour is a fiend, the devil an angel.

Kleist does not need psychoanalysis to draw this conclusion. Instead, Kleist uses the disciplined structure of the novella to create and express the irony of morality in human nature. Rohmer too, having examined the irony of morality in his own short stories and corresponding films, *Six contes moraux*, rejects a psychoanalytical reading of Kleist's story to devote himself to the moral dilemma of the novella. While the irony of the bourgeois, happy ending of *Ma Nuit chez Maud* is precipitated by Françoise's extramarital affair with Maud's ex-husband, the irony of the bourgeois, happy ending of *La Marquise d'O...* transpires from the Count's rape of the Marquise. However, the happy ending of *Ma Nuit chez Maud* is *in spite of* a moral transgression, while the happy ending of *La Marquise d'O...* is *because of* a moral transgression. Perhaps this distinction speaks to the difference between France's moral tale and Germany's novella.



While the moral tale is based in moral ambiguity, the central event of a novella can challenge prejudices, social standards, and norms of behaviour. Ultimately, however, the happy endings of both *Ma Nuit chez Maud* and *La Marquise d'O...* occur behind the back of bourgeois conventions.

### Chapter Three: The Proverb: *La Femme de l'aviateur*

The 'Moral Tales' were films in which I started with a theme and created variations upon it, the 'Comedies and Proverbs' are films in which I have looked for a theme. It happens that I have more or less found the theme of the first four 'Comedies and Proverbs' [*La Femme de l'aviateur*, *Le Beau mariage*, *Pauline à la plage*, *Les Nuits de la pleine lune*], you can see the similitude of the situations, the character always in his [*sic*] attempt, and the film begins in the place where it ends. (Reynaud 265)  
-Eric Rohmer (1985)

As film theorist Berenice Reynaud remarks, "Rohmer likes to connect his films in series" (265). Rohmer's first film series was *Six contes moraux*. His second series is *Comédies et proverbes/Comedies and Proverbs*, with *La Femme de l'aviateur/The Aviator's Wife* (1980) as the first film of the series. For *Six contes moraux*, Rohmer uses the moral tale, a literary genre of French origin, as a model for the films in the series. For *La Marquise d'O...*, Rohmer uses the novella, a literary genre of German origin, to inform the structure of his film. For *Comédies et proverbes*, Rohmer chooses the "proverb" to inform the textual strategies of the films in his new series.

"Proverb," however, has two meanings in this case. In the first instance, a proverb is an antiquated expression of wisdom, such as the proverb that opens *La Femme de l'aviateur*, "On ne saurait penser à rien" 'One can't think of nothing.' However, a proverb, or *proverbe*, is also a French dramatic fable, which frequently possesses a moral theme. The first indication that Rohmer is referring to not only "proverbs," but also *proverbes* can be found in the title of the series, *Comédies et proverbes*, borrowed from French dramatist Alfred de Musset's collection of one-act plays, *Comédies et proverbes*. Musset's plays were short comedies that explored the moral applications of a central proverb. Rohmer uses this concept for his own *Comédies et proverbes*, in which each film is a comedy developing from the exploration of a central proverb. Furthermore, the central proverb of *La Femme de*

*l'aviateur*, “One can’t think of nothing,” refers to one of Musset’s dramatic *proverbes*, *On ne saurait penser à tout/One can’t think of everything*. However, by changing Musset’s “everything” to “nothing,” Rohmer does something much different in his film on contemporary life in Paris than Musset does in his dramatic *Proverbe* about an absentminded Marquis in nineteenth century provincial France.

### **The Proverb**

To understand the moral applications of Rohmer’s “One can’t think of nothing,” it is necessary to examine first the characteristics of a “proverb.” As with the novella, we might be tempted to consider the proverb a “light” literary form, because it is short. In fact, it is the shortest literary form. However, also like the novella, the proverb’s brevity belies its potential to communicate intense subject matter. Though short, the proverb can relate the wisdom and insight of ancient philosophers and contemporary scholars. Proverbs can also express the musings and witticisms of writers and poets. According to Paremiologist Wolfgang Mieder, in his comprehensive study, *Proverbs: A Handbook*, “The wisdom of proverbs has guided people in their social interactions for thousands of years throughout the world” (xi).<sup>12</sup> However, although proverbs offer philosophy for the masses, they “do not [necessarily] represent a logical philosophical system” (Mieder 1). Therefore, while each of Rohmer’s films emerges from the moral applications of a proverb, the result is a series of six significantly different comedies.

In *La Femme de l'aviateur*, the application of the proverb, “One can’t think of nothing,” develops into the romantic comedy of François and Anne. François becomes jealous when he spies Anne’s ex-lover, Christian, leaving her apartment early one morning. Unable to occupy his thoughts with anything other than the

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<sup>12</sup> Paremiology is the study of proverbs and their meaning. Paremiography is the gathering and chronicling of proverbs. Of both Paremiology and Paremiography, Wolfgang Mieder is perhaps the most renowned contemporary scholar.

suspicion of Anne's betrayal, François spends the entire day tailing Christian around Paris. In *Le Beau mariage/A Good Marriage* (1982), a phrase from one of the fables of famous French fabulist Jean de La Fontaine, "Can any of us refrain from building castles in Spain?" sparks the story of art student Sabine and her pursuit of the young lawyer Edmond. After only a brief encounter with Edmond, Sabine decides that he is her ideal man, and instantly sets out to make him her husband. In *Pauline à la plage/Pauline at the Beach* (1983), Rohmer applies the proverb, "A wagging tongue bites itself," to the summer holiday of divorcée Marion and her fifteen-year-old niece, Pauline. Young Pauline proves to have a better instinct for love and relationships than her beautiful Aunt Marion. Playboy Henry easily deceives Marion, while she spends the summer making excuses for him and rationalizing his behaviour. In *Les Nuits de la pleine lune/Full Moon in Paris* (1984), the ironic application of the proverb, "He who has two women loses his soul; he who has two houses loses his mind," to a female character, becomes the tale of Louise, who, in her search for the right man, must choose between Rémi and the sexy saxophone player. In her search for the right home, she must choose between Marne-la-Vallée and Paris. By the time she makes up her mind, she loses everything. Rohmer uses a line from French poet Arthur Rimbaud's "Chanson de la plus haute tour"/"Song of the Highest Tower," "Ah for the days/that set our hearts ablaze," to create Marie's stubborn character in *Le Rayon vert/The Green Ray/Summer* (1986). Reynaud remarks that, "Knowing how awkward she is with others, but still going on, Marie is a comical character *à la* Keaton" (259). Finally, the title of the last film of the series, *L'Ami de mon amie/My Girlfriend's Boyfriend/Boyfriends and Girlfriends* (1987), hints at the French pun that opens the film, "The friends of my friends are my friends." In French, this proverb actually suggests that, "The boyfriend of my friend could become my boyfriend." Rohmer's

film thus follows the tale of Blanche and Léa, friends who ultimately swap boyfriends. Although the series does not derive from a common theme, and “even if the ending is not pre-decided,” Rohmer remarks that *Comédies et proverbes* is a “closed system” (Reynaud 265).

Unlike the moral tale and the novella, literary genres that originated in journals, newspapers and periodicals, the proverb, a “verbal folklore genre,” shares its history with fairy tales, legends, tall tales, jokes and riddles (Mieder 1). Although proverbs come from oral tradition, originating in preliterate times, Mieder asserts that they are “effective rhetoric in oral and written communication” (xi). Applied cleverly, a proverb can thus become an effective strategy of communication. But what exactly *is* a proverb? That is to say, what makes one phrase a proverb and another one not?

Mieder explores numerous definitions of proverbs from scholars spanning several decades. In “The Nature of the Proverb” (1932), American paremiologist Bartlett Jere Whiting makes his attempt:

A proverb is an expression which, owing its birth to the people, testifies to its origin in form and phrase. It expresses what is apparently a fundamental truth – that is, a truism – in homely language, often adorned, however, with alliteration and rhyme. It is usually short, but need not be; it is usually true, but need not be. Some proverbs have both a literal and figurative meaning, either of which makes perfect sense; but more often they have but one of the two. A proverb must be venerable; it must bear the sign of antiquity, and, since such signs may be counterfeited by a clever literary man, it should be attested in different places at different times. (Mieder 2)

Mieder remarks that this definition is “a useful summation, albeit not a very precise statement” (2). Mieder claims that the definition “represents a reaction” to a statement made a year earlier by another paremiologist, Archer Taylor, in the classic study *The Proverb* (1931) (2-3). Taylor’s study opens with this “ironical introductory remark,” which has since “gained ‘proverbial’ status among paremiologists:

The definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking; and should we fortunately combine in a single definition all the essential elements and give each the proper emphasis, we should not even then have a touchstone. An incommunicable quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not. Hence no definition will enable us to identify positively a sentence as proverbial. Those who do not speak a language can never recognize all its proverbs, and similarly much that is truly proverbial escapes us in Elizabethan and older English. Let us be content with recognizing that a proverb is a saying current among the folk. At least so much of a definition is indisputable. (Mieder 3)

Although his definition is vague, Taylor makes an important point about language itself being a factor in the detection of proverbs. In *La Femme de l'Aviateur*, for example, a plentitude of proverbs appears in the English subtitles, including “absence makes the heart grow fonder,” and “there’s plenty of fish in the sea.” But are these proverbs directly translated from the French? Or is there a similar French proverb that the translator has transposed into an English (or American) proverb? For example, as Anne and François are arguing in the street, according to the English subtitles, François exclaims, “Put yourself in my shoes!” which is a derivative of an English/American proverb. In the spoken French, however, this “proverb” is the imperative, “Tu dois à ma place,” which literally translates as, “Put yourself in my place.” As Taylor indicates, it is difficult to know if this is a derivative of a French proverb or merely an expression. Furthermore, even with the definitions from Whiting and Taylor, it remains difficult to know the difference between a proverb and a common expression. Thus, Mieder makes his own attempt at a definition:

Proverbs [are] concise traditional statements of apparent truths with currency among the folk. More elaborately stated, proverbs are short, generally known sentences of the folk that contain wisdom, truths, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form that are handed down from generation to generation. (4)

While this definition is an improvement from the ambiguity of the first two, ultimately, even Mieder admits that, “The meaning of any proverb must...be analyzed in its unique context, be it social, literary, rhetorical, journalistic, or whatever” (9).

Rohmer does not credit the proverb that opens *La Femme de l'aviateur*, “One can’t think of nothing,” to any particular author, which is characteristic of proverbs; their origin is often ambiguous, their author unknown. It is possible, however, to explore the nature of the proverb to deduce its origin and analyze its meaning. For example, “One can’t think of nothing,” is possibly a derivation of French philosopher René Descartes’s maxim, “Je pense, donc je suis” ‘I think, therefore I am.’ Descartes’s philosophy, found in his *Discours de la méthode/Discourse on Method*, first published in 1637, expresses the notion that thinking and being are the same, that if we are to be, we are to think. If this is the true origin of Rohmer’s proverb, then *La Femme de l'aviateur* is not only the moral applications of the proverb, “One can’t think of nothing”; but also it is the moral exploration of Descartes’ philosophy that thinking constitutes being. As noted in the Introduction, Astruc remarkably asserts that Descartes, whose ontological views were written as a personal narrative, would have “written” a film had he lived in the film era:

...a Descartes of today would already have shut himself up in his bedroom with a 16mm camera and some film, and would be writing his philosophy on film: for his *Discours de la Méthode* would today be of such a kind that only the cinema could express it satisfactorily. (19)

Although Rohmer does not “shut himself up in his bedroom,” but instead turns to the streets of Paris, *La Femme de l'aviateur* is arguably an exploration of Astruc’s claim (Astruc 19). Furthermore, Rohmer’s practical application of Astruc’s proposition becomes, in turn, the moral exploration of Descartes’s philosophy. The *Discourse on Method* of today is, in effect, Rohmer’s *La Femme de l'aviateur*.

Of the four films examined here, *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, *La Marquise d'O...*, *La Femme de l'aviateur*, and *Conte d'hiver*, *La Femme de l'aviateur* appears on the surface the least literary. Unlike Trintignant, Maud and Vidal in *Ma Nuit chez Maud* (and, as we will explore in the next chapter, unlike the protagonists of *Conte d'hiver*),

the characters of *La Femme de l'aviateur* never drift into philosophical discussions, such as Maud's dinner table conversation on Pascal's *Pensées*. Furthermore, while Rohmer's adaptation of Kleist is a transposition of the novella's narrative and structure, and *Ma Nuit chez Maud* uses the moral tale as a literary model, *La Femme de l'aviateur*, by contrast, is informed by a proverb, a form lacking in both structure and narrative. Rohmer thus returns to New Wave strategy. Instead of relying solely on a literary model to inform the film's substance, structure and style, Rohmer uses the mise-en-scène in a literary, or "writerly," way that recalls Astruc's *caméra-stylo*.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Mise-en-scène**

Contrary to Rohmer's use of location in *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, where Clermont-Ferrand serves not only as a historical, political context, but also in an allegorical capacity to create irony, Rohmer uses the mise-en-scène of Paris to articulate the story in *La Femme de l'aviateur*. Unlike his usual approach to filming, Rohmer did not research locations before shooting began. In the interview series, "Le Cinéma des cinéastes"/"The cinema of filmmakers," Rohmer explains to interviewer Claude-Jean Philippe that he found the lawyer's building while filming:

I hadn't prepared in advance because there was no rush. So I had no idea where to shoot next. The choice for the lawyer's flat depended on the café. You can always see a door from a café, but not always a café from a door, especially in this area. So...I went for a little walk. I went to check whether the café was open. We asked if we could shoot in the café and at the flat of the concierge only when we reached the door.

Rohmer admits that this was a remarkable sequence of events for him as filmmaker, explaining that, "It's exceptional because generally I research locations well in advance." With *La Femme de l'aviateur*, however, Rohmer elucidates that, "the film was written without thinking how it would be directed. Directing happened later." In

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<sup>13</sup>I make a case here that Rohmer is using the mise-en-scène in a "writerly" way, which evokes Astruc's *caméra-stylo*. However, I do not use "writerly" as Roland Barthes uses the term in *S/Z*. I simply mean that Rohmer uses the mise-en-scène to articulate the story.



Rohmer's original French statement, his explanation is more revealing. The English words "directed" and "directing" have been translated from the French "mise-en-scène." Thus, Rohmer uses the mise-en-scène to write *La Femme de l'aviateur*.

In previous films, Rohmer's strict cinematic transposition of a pre-existing literary work has been so extreme as to purportedly bend the will of nature. For example, in a particular scene in *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, Rohmer's moral tale demands snow. Incredibly, on the day that Rohmer planned to film the scene, it snowed. With *La Femme de l'aviateur*, however, the process has been reversed. Rohmer describes how ultimately the weather influenced the narrative: "It started to rain as the sequence in the park was finishing. I hadn't predicted the weather we would get as we would leave the park. So I told myself, 'Why not shoot under the rain since our equipment is light?' So we shot the exit from the park under the rain." In response, interviewer Philippe points out that, in the beginning of the film, Christian tells Anne it is meant to rain that day. However, Rohmer explains that the earlier scene was shot after the scene in the Buttes Chaumont was filmed, after it had already rained. Therefore, he altered the dialogue of the earlier scene to match the mise-en-scène of the later scene, which takes place in the rain. Rohmer concludes that, "I hadn't predicted the rain, strictly speaking, but I knew I would welcome it one way or another, with pleasure." In this way, we can see Rohmer's literary use of the mise-en-scène to create the tone, texture and text of his film.

### ***La Femme de l'aviateur*: Synopsis of a sleuth story**

Set in contemporary Paris, *La Femme de l'aviateur* centres on François, a twenty-year-old law student, working night shifts at the post office. François loves his girlfriend Anne, but they rarely have time to see each other. Early one morning, however, he happens to see Anne leaving home with her ex, Christian the aviator,

who had come to break up with her for good. Stunned by the finality of the break-up, Anne allows François to become the victim of his own jealous imagination. Later in the day, François happens to spot Christian in the train station. Obsessed with the idea that Anne might leave him for her ex, François instinctively begins tailing Christian through the streets of Paris. François follows Christian and his mysterious blonde companion into the Buttes Chaumont, a large park in central Paris, where a young woman, Lucie, soon discovers François's sleuthing. Lucie is eager to help him with his detective work, gathering evidence and proposing theories. After following the couple out of the park, Lucie and François lose sight of Christian and the blonde. Lucie eventually goes home. François returns to Anne's apartment, where she ultimately reveals the true reason for Christian's visit. Finally reassured of Anne's affection for him, François walks to Lucie's to relate the solution to the afternoon's mystery. When François spies Lucie in the arms of her boyfriend, however, he falls prey to a new jealousy. The film ends as François heads back to the sorting office for another night of work.

*La Femme de l'aviateur*, informed as it is by the literary model of the proverb, "One can't think of nothing," explores the moral applications of Descartes's philosophy of being constituted by thinking. Descartes's maxim thus manifests as the story of a young man obsessed with the thought of losing a woman, and the thought drives all of his actions. His thinking becomes his being. Driven by obsession, François becomes a sleuth, a detective, tailing his girlfriend's ex around the streets of Paris. It is evident that *La Femme de l'aviateur*, a detective story, is influenced by the tradition of detective literature and film style, such as Sherlock Holmes and film noir. Rohmer not only develops Descartes's maxim in his film, he also uses the *mise-en-scène* to inform the narrative, evoking Astruc's *caméra-stylo*. With the "camera" as

“pen,” the mise-en-scène can guide the film. Paris, a labyrinth of streets and alleyways, bus routes and letterboxes, tells the tale.

### **To the Sorting Office, From the Sorting Office**

In the final scenes of *La Femme de l'aviateur*, François, consumed with a new jealousy, begins to tail Lucie's boyfriend down a dimly lit path, while the song, “Paris has charmed me,” begins to play. As François eventually heads back to the sorting office for the night, returning to the place where his day began, Arielle Dombasle sings:

Paris has charmed me  
 Paris disarmed me  
 Turning all my hopes to alarms  
 I live alone under my garret roof  
 From friends and strangers I remain aloof  
 Yet still, I feel proud of my solitude  
 As on the hardships of life I brood  
 Life in the city so fast and wide  
 Constantly buffeted by wind and tide  
 It's a struggle for survival renewed each day  
 With cruel destiny refusing to point the way  
 Now the dark and malevolent night  
 Drives all ease from anguished sight  
 And muffled roars still prowl the street  
 For the heart of Paris never ceases...to beat

*La Femme de l'aviateur* reveals Paris as a type of labyrinth. As Dombasle's song suggests, François is a man alone, attempting to conquer the mean and maze-like

streets of Paris with little more than a bit of faith and a bit of reason, neither of which he seems to possess in excess. François spends most of the film wandering the streets, avenues, and back alleyways of Paris searching for Anne, following Christian, looking for Lucie, and finally tailing her boyfriend. Images of busy train stations and crowded mailrooms reinforce the feeling that Paris is a complicated maze of transportation and communication, to be navigated on foot, by train, or through the post. In addition, the cyclical structure of the film's narrative – that it ends in the place where it begins – reinforces the labyrinth motif created by the *mise-en-scène*.

The film opens before sunrise at a postal sorting office in Paris. The first shot of the film is dark, with a small window of light in the middle of the frame. Below the window, we read the word "POSTES." A man with a bandana wrapped around his neck stands on the other side of the window. He appears to be doing physical labour, perhaps lifting boxes. There is a cut to a loading dock where men unload bags of letters from large freight trucks. The grey hues of the concrete walls and floors of the loading dock match the men's blue jeans, grey smocks and blue-collared shirts. Rohmer's camera shows the working class working hard. The next cut reveals a close-up of hands untying one of the bags, while the following cut shows a close-up of bundles of letters being thrown into a large pile. Next, we see rows of letterboxes, with a close-up of hands filing the envelopes into the boxes marked 7, 8, 9. Finally, there is a cut to a medium shot of François, who stands on the opposite side of the sorting boxes. François looks younger than most of his co-workers with his blue eyes and wavy blond hair. He removes the letters from the boxes and gathers the newly sorted envelopes into bundles, wrapping each bundle with a rubber band. The next cut reveals, once more, the other side of the letterboxes. François's co-workers have gone. It is nearing the end of the night, and the workers are going home. The final

cut of the opening sequence returns us to François. The boxes are now empty. He gathers the remaining bundles and leaves his station. He, too, is finished for the night. The letters came in; they were sorted, and sent out again. A cyclical pattern is established in the first scene of the film. The notion of recirculation and allusions to the labyrinth of Paris will surface throughout the film. Night will come again. François will return to the sorting office. The letters will come in and be sent out again. As Dombasle sings at the end of the film, “The heart of Paris never ceases to beat.”

In the next scene, François washes his hands, whistling the tune by Dombasle. As he looks at himself in the mirror, combing his fingers through his wavy hair, we hear a co-worker speak to him from off screen, saying, “François, I’ve found someone for that plumbing job.” The young man who will ultimately prove to be Lucie’s boyfriend enters the frame. François gives his co-worker Anne’s address and decides to stop by Anne’s apartment to leave her a note about the plumber. The next series of shots reveals François descending the steps to the metro station, riding the train while looking sleepy, and re-emerging from the metro station onto the street. The Paris metro, with its maze of underground tunnels and passageways, reinforces the representation of Paris as a labyrinth. François eventually approaches Anne’s building, but before he goes inside, he spots Anne leaving with her ex, Christian. Reeling from this discovery, François returns to his cluttered apartment, unsure of what to do next.

### **Lucie in the Buttes Chaumont**

Sitting in the Parisian café that has become their stakeout, waiting for Christian and the blonde to re-emerge from the building across the street, Lucie looks eagerly at François and announces that she has a theory. However, she first poses the

question, “What would Sherlock Holmes have done?” François shrugs and replies, “That’s fiction; this is real life.” Lucie remains undeterred and declares, “Personally, I like life when it’s most like a novel.” She asks again, “What would Sherlock do?”

When François encounters Lucie in the Buttes Chaumont, the tone of the film changes. First, compared to the dreary hues of the sorting office, which open the film, the greenery and sunlight of the park create a light-hearted atmosphere. Second, Lucie’s optimistic outlook contrasts François’s melancholy character. For Lucie, François’s obsession is merely a game, a mystery to solve. François’s predicament may well be titled, “François and the case of Christian and the mysterious blonde,” or perhaps, as Rohmer himself seems to suggest with the unlikely film title, *La Femme de l’aviateur/The Aviator’s Wife*, “François and the case of the aviator’s wife.” From Lucie’s perspective, helping François with his sleuthing is like reading a Holmes story. After all, she herself confesses that she enjoys life “when it’s most like a novel.”

Lucie and François first notice one another on the bus, but François is so engrossed in his pursuit of Christian and the blonde, that he initially pays her no attention. When all four characters end up in the Buttes Chaumont, Rohmer’s camera shows Christian and the blonde in the foreground, François behind them in centre frame, and Lucie in the back, trailing behind the other three with her own agenda. The Buttes Chaumont, with its winding pathways cast in shifting light and shadow under the park’s foliage, is also portrayed as a type of labyrinth. However, the labyrinth that Lucie encounters in the Buttes Chaumont is not the menacing, inescapable maze of Paris that confronts François. Instead, the park represents a simple labyrinth, reminiscent of the classical Greek maze, wherein the challenge is

straightforward, and one can come and go without too much difficulty.<sup>14</sup> Such a maze is perhaps suitable for a girl who tackles François's predicament as Sherlock Holmes case and declares his evident, emotional agony to be "most interesting...a super story!"<sup>15</sup>

Although François is already acting the sleuth, posing as a private eye, his actions are motivated by instinct. Driven by his obsession that Anne might leave him for her ex, François later admits that he had no plan of action when he began following Christian and the mysterious blonde. When Lucie becomes involved, however, the detective work becomes a game, a pure puzzle, a whodunit. Lucie's first instinct is to gather clues. Like Ariadne, who gives Theseus a "clue of thread" to navigate Minos's maze, Lucie attempts to give François a "thread of clues" to solve the case of Christian and the mysterious blonde. She theorizes that the blonde is Christian's wife and resolves to obtain photographic evidence of them together in the park. Lucie thus tries to outsmart an American tourist in order to obtain a photograph of Christian and his blonde companion.

As Lucie approaches the American tourist and his girlfriend, she enters a frame that includes Christian and the blonde, sitting on the grass and reading quietly. Lucie attempts to manipulate the American tourist into taking a photo of herself with the couple in the background. First, she offers to take a photo of the American and his

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<sup>14</sup> In his essay, "From Sherlock Holmes to the Hard-Boiled Detective in Film Noir," Jerold J. Abrams explains that, in the myth of the maze, King Minos of Crete has Daedalus construct a labyrinth. Inside the labyrinth is a Minotaur, "a monster with a bull's body and human head," who feeds on young Athenians (70). Abrams explains that Prince Theseus is "quite reasonably outraged" and thus plots to enter Minos's maze (70). However, when Prince Theseus arrives in Crete, he meets and soon falls in love with the beautiful Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos. Not wanting to lose her beloved Theseus inside the horrific maze, Ariadne supplies him with a sword and a "clue of thread." Theseus trails the thread behind him as he enters Minos's maze, kills the Minotaur with the sword, and follows the "clue of thread" safely back to the entrance of the maze.

<sup>15</sup> Abrams proposes that, "in the hands of Conan Doyle, the Minotaur is now the criminal, trapped in the underworld 'labyrinth of crime'; the 'clue of thread' is now the 'thread of clues' (clues as signs to be detected)" (70).

girlfriend. The couple stands together, smiling, frozen in front of the camera. Rohmer cuts to this shot twice before Lucie takes the photo, as if to emphasize Lucie's empowerment as she briefly controls the camera. The tourist couple, on the other hand, remains motionless, momentarily powerless while trapped in Lucie's gaze. When the American insists on repaying the favour by taking a Polaroid of Lucie, his lust for the young French girl is evident. His girlfriend, in an attempt to control the gaze, intervenes and takes the photo of Lucie herself. As Lucie poses for the photo, Rohmer's camera clearly shows Christian and the blonde in the background of the frame, exactly as Lucie had planned. Nonetheless, when Lucie receives her Polaroid, the couple has been cut out of the photo. Lucie's failed pursuit of photographic evidence in the Buttes Chaumont recalls Thomas's incomplete documentation of a suspected murder in a London park in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blowup* (1966). The "photograph" has an allegorical, reflexive connection to film, specifically to the "image" of film. Rohmer uses the photograph as a metaphor for a cinema of "pure plastic expression," a cinema unable to portray reflection, "a character's developing awareness of himself" (Crisp 12). Rohmer insists that, "purely visual cinema" is incapable of exploring the realm of reflection and awareness (Crisp 12). As Lucie's photograph reveals only "a wisp of hair" (the aviator and his blonde cut out of the background for aesthetic purposes), a film that relies solely on the "image" sacrifices the element of reflection that the literary realm, the "word," brings to film.

After her unsuccessful mission to obtain evidence of Christian and the blonde spending the afternoon together, Lucie returns to François, who is waiting for her on the other side of the park. While describing his affection for his girlfriend, François shows Lucie a photograph of Anne. There is a close-up of the photograph as Lucie



examines it. Lucie agrees that Anne is very pretty, and remarks, “Her eyes are lovely, but so sad, asking François, “Is she sad?” However, François insists that Anne only looks sad in photographs, explaining, “Actually, she’s quite cheerful. She laughs a lot.” Again, Rohmer reinforces the idea that the still image in isolation will come up short.

Rohmer continues this discourse on photography when François finally visits Anne after a long afternoon of detective work. In a scene reminiscent of the central bedroom scene of Godard’s *À bout de souffle/Breathless* (1960), François and Anne proceed to argue, cry, kiss and cuddle, all within the confines of Anne’s one-room apartment. Although Anne is initially annoyed to see François, she ultimately confesses the real reason for Christian’s early-morning visit. She explains that Christian had disappeared three months ago: “I imagined he’d come back, and carry me off like Prince Charming. [...] Then this morning...the fairy tale of my dreams came true. The note under my door. Then him. The dream in flesh and blood. Simply to say: ‘I love my wife.’” Anne concedes that Christian’s wife is pretty and shows François a photograph of her. There is a close-up of the photograph as François examines it. Christian is in the picture, along with the “mysterious” blonde and another couple. François remarks, “She’s different from you.” Anne replies, “You think so?” François responds, “Yes, even if you bleached your hair.” To François’s surprise, however, Anne clarifies that the blonde is *not* Christian’s wife, but his sister. Christian’s wife is instead the brunette at the far right of the photograph. François becomes suddenly pensive, evidently reflecting on the afternoon’s events and Lucie’s theory that the blonde was Christian’s wife.

Rohmer invokes the Holmes paradigm only to disassemble it, as if to suggest that the world is far more complex than Lucie’s view of it. Not only is Lucie’s

photograph “wrong” (because it does not include the evidence of Christian with his blonde companion), but also her entire theory is wrong. The blonde is not Christian’s wife after all. Similarly, Rohmer invokes the photograph to explore the visual plastics of the “image.” All of the photographs depicted in *La Femme de l’aviateur* prove to be misleading. Christian and the blonde are not in Lucie’s “photographic evidence.” Anne only looks sad in photographs, and, in Anne’s photograph of Christian, he stands next to his sister, not his wife. Furthermore, almost everything that François observes, he misinterprets. Anne is with her ex, but they are not getting back together; they are ending things for good. Christian is with a mysterious blonde, but she is not his wife; she is his sister. Finally, Lucie is not just an innocent stranger in the park; she is his co-worker’s girlfriend. In *La Femme de l’aviateur*, Rohmer reveals that, without the literary realm to portray reflection, “the external shell of things, which the stark image presents to us” can lie (Crisp 11). As the world cannot fit into a pre-conceived narrative of the simple detective story, neither can a “purely visual cinema” portray the moral ambiguity of contemporary life in Paris (Crisp 12).

### **François and Film Noir**

François cannot escape the rhizomatic labyrinth of obsession and jealousy.<sup>16</sup> As François leaves Anne’s apartment and heads to Lucie’s, the atmosphere is neither dreary, as it is in the opening scene at the sorting office, nor is it light-hearted and adventuresome, as it is with Lucie in the Buttes Chaumont. Instead, the final scenes of *La Femme de l’aviateur* portray the mysterious and shadowy mise-en-scène of film

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<sup>16</sup> Abrams explains that the rhizomatic maze was first established by the American philosopher Charles S. Pierce (1839-1914), and was later developed by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (72). According to Abrams, the rhizomatic maze is “the labyrinth of unlimited clues” (72). The maze is named after the agricultural term “rhizome,” a structure that grows horizontally, or sideways (Abrams 72). Abrams explains that, “Like grass or seaweed, or the Internet, or even language, a rhizome, according to Deleuze, has ‘neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows’ (72). It is impossible to escape the rhizomatic maze, only to move deeper into it.

noir. Film noir, unlike the still image, invokes moral ambiguity. Film noir was also used by New Wave filmmakers to explore the “writerly” use of *mise-en-scène* in film.

When François arrives at Lucie’s apartment, he is startled to discover Lucie in the arms of his co-worker from the sorting office. Illuminated by the dim yellow glow of an overhead streetlamp, Lucie and her boyfriend kiss goodnight. Lurking in the shadow of a parked van, François watches the couple in the canted reflection of a side-view mirror. When Lucie’s boyfriend finally leaves, François follows him. As the two figures walk away from the camera, deeper into the frame and deeper into the darkness, François fades into the noir-like shadows of the *mise-en-scène*. Unlike Lucie, who emanates a playful, Holmes-like energy when she takes on “François and the case of the aviator’s wife,” François remains embroiled in an ambiguous obsession, a ceaseless jealousy. Once he is certain Anne loves him, he becomes jealous at the sight of Lucie in the amorous embrace of a co-worker. Disappearing into the darkness of his obsession, François becomes “all-seeing yet invisible,” an avatar, according to Richard Burton, of the protean criminal of mid-nineteenth century Parisian mythology (53). François becomes a voyeur as the labyrinth of Paris closes in on him.

François, no longer capable of facing Lucie, chooses instead to mail the explanation of the afternoon’s events, the solution to the mystery of Christian and the mysterious blonde: “They did go to the lawyer’s, but the woman was his sister. We never thought of that.” The post office now represents that faceless means of communication. François drops the card into a mailbox at the train station and walks into the crowd. The final high angle, wide shot displays the interior of the large station. The camera remains motionless as François joins the throng of commuters. As Dombasle sings her haunting tune about “life in the city so fast and wide,” we

soon lose sight of François among the busy Parisians. The train station, the postal system, and the general hustle and bustle of the crowd reinforce Rohmer's portrayal of Paris as an inescapable labyrinth, while the mise-en-scène of the city, in turn, represents the maze of jealousy and obsession that ultimately consumes François.

## Conclusion

It is possible that Rohmer's proverb, "One can't think of nothing," dates farther back than Descartes's "I think, therefore I am." The idea that thinking and being are the same originates with Parmenides, the ancient Greek philosopher of Elea. The crux of Parmenides' philosophy, found in the remaining fragments of a poem written between 490 and 475 BC, is that, "...the same thing is there for thinking and being." Parmenides' ontological views were based on the assumption that thinking and being are the same, or rather, that "being" and "being thought of" are the same. Thus, whatever can be thought or spoken of can exist and indeed must exist. However, in *La Femme de l'aviateur*, François spends the entire day imagining things that prove to be untrue. Rohmer's film is based on François thinking things that are not real. Therefore, unlike Musset's dramatic *proverbes* that illustrate a central proverb, Rohmer does not illustrate the proverb, "One can't think of nothing;" he challenges it.

Furthermore, according to the standard interpretation of Parmenides, because there is nothing that can never be thought of, nothing ever changes. We exist in a world of one, one thought, one being. All that is, always has been, and always will be. The inescapable labyrinth of misperceptions and misconceptions, jealousy and obsession is reality. Like the "image," change is an illusion. François will remain the jealous observer. He will return to the mailroom, night after night. The letters will come in only to be sent out again, and the heart of Paris will never cease to beat.

Rohmer, however, questions this view. Does nothing ever change? In *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, Rohmer explores the after affects of Vichy France and the fascist perspective. As we can no longer see Clermont-Ferrand and Catholicism with innocent eyes, Trintignant's worldview is similarly forced to change when he discovers that his Catholic bride is not the innocent virgin. Likewise, in *La Marquise d'O...*, the Marquise must revise her view of the Count when she discovers that he was her aggressor. Discovering that "good" and "evil" live side by side, she, too, can no longer look at the world with innocent eyes. Finally, in *La Femme de l'aviateur*, having thought that Lucie was perhaps flirting with him in the Buttes Chaumont, François must review his perception of her when he sees her in the arms of his co-worker. In all three films, Rohmer emphasizes the importance of reflection. The question is not, does the world change? Rather, can we change our view of the world?

Rohmer uses the photograph allegorically for an intratextual discourse on the role of the "image" in film. Although he appropriates Astruc's *caméra-stylo* to use the mise-en-scène in a "writerly" way, Rohmer also challenges the notion of "camera" as "pen." Rohmer proposes that being tied the "image," rather than the "word," risks creating a film of "pure plastic expression" that does not "pierce the external shell of things, which the stark image presents to us" (Crisp 12, 11). With a film made thirty years after the height of the New Wave, Rohmer suggests that we can no longer look at film with innocent eyes.

### Chapter Four: The Fairy Tale: *Conte d'hiver*

Now, I would like to direct ... a new series [...] that will have an open ending, i.e. there wouldn't be a final failure, nor a return to the departure point. (Reynaud 265)  
-Eric Rohmer (1992)

Having already completed two film series, *Six conte moraux* and *Comédies et proverbes*, Rohmer embarks on a new series, *Contes des quatre saisons/Tales of the Four Seasons*. At first glance, the premise of these four new films seems to depart from the structure of Rohmer's two previous series. Unlike the films of *Six contes moraux*, there is no "final failure," nor is there "a return to the departure point," as occurs in the films of *Comédies and proverbes* (Reynaud 265). Instead, we find Rohmer allows the films of *Contes des quatre saisons* an "open ending" (Reynaud 265). In the case of *Conte d'hiver/A Tale of Winter* (1992), the second film of the series, Rohmer's "open ending" is a happy ending. However, the happy ending of *Conte d'hiver* is not the ironic happy ending of *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, but rather an unambiguous happy ending, which recalls the "happily ever after" motif of classic fairy tales, such as "Cinderella."

Although it recalls certain elements of *La Femme de l'aviateur*, in many ways, *Conte d'hiver* is a reworking of the characters and themes of *Ma Nuit chez Maud*. Nonetheless, the setting has moved from Clermont-Ferrand to Paris, from the lingering effects of Vichy France to contemporary society, and from Vidal's leftist politics of to sexual politics. Rohmer's literary model has likewise shifted, from the irony and ambiguity of the moral tale, to the sincerity and didacticism of the fairy tale.

All four of the films in Rohmer's *Contes des quatre saisons* might be interpreted as contemporary Cinderella tales, but perhaps none so much as *Conte d'hiver*, in which Félicie believes, beyond reason, that she will one day be reunited with Charles, her true love. Similarly, in *Conte de printemps/A Tale of Springtime*

(1990), Natasha knows that her friend, Jeanne, and her father, Igor, are destined to be together. In *Conte d'été/A Summer's Tale* (1996), the traditional gender roles are reversed with Gaspard as a love-struck maths student, who desires Lena above all other women, including Margot (who is friendlier) and Solène (who is more eager). Finally, in *Conte d'automne/Autumn Tale* (1998), Magali, a forty-year-old winemaker and widow, accepts that she is simply too old for romance. However, her friends, Rosine and Isabelle, are determined to find the right man for her. By the end of the film, Magali finds herself falling for the amiable and eligible bachelor, Gerald. Unlike, the stilted, ironic happy ending of *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, the film endings of *Contes des quatre saisons* seem more emotional, more genuine. The authenticity of each emotional happy ending is highlighted by the “tears of joy” that conclude each film. Both Félicie and her daughter, Elise, cry for the happiness they feel when they are finally reunited with Charles in *Conte d'hiver*. Jeanne cries unexpectedly when she realizes her feelings for Igor in *Conte de printemps*. Margot sheds only a single, silent tear for Gaspard in *Conte d'été*, while Magali, in contrast, sobs hysterically when she discovers her affection for Gerald in *Conte d'automne*.

### **The Fairy Tale**

The fairy tale, like the proverb, originated as a “verbal folklore genre,” though writers eventually appropriated the genre for the literary realm (Mieder 1). Jack Zipes, in his most recent study of the genre, *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre* (2006), admits that it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the genre evolved from oral to literary tradition. However, Zipes proposes that, “we can trace motifs and elements of the literary fairy tale to numerous types of storytelling and stories of antiquity that contributed to the formation of a particular branch of telling and writing tales” (3). For example, Zipes explains that, “In the Western

European tradition this branching occurred some time in the early medieval period (perhaps even earlier) and led to the social institution of a special literary genre (*conte de fée*) in the seventeenth century that today we call the literary fairy tale” (3). The fairy tale as a literary genre can thus be attributed to French writers such as Charles Perrault and Madame d’Aulnoy. Though they were accomplished literary figures, Perrault and Aulnoy did not write, or create, the tales, but rather they wrote them down, thus institutionalizing the *conte de fée*, the “fairy tale, and canonizing folk tales such as “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Sleeping Beauty,” and “Cinderella.”

The early writers of literary fairy tales had varying motivations in appropriating the oral folk tales for the literary realm. In *Folk and Fairy Tales*, Martin Hallett and Barbara Karasek propose that Perrault wrote the tales, because he recognized the value of the folk or fairy story, an oral pastime practiced among the common people, as entertainment for the aristocracy and royal court of Louis XIV, of which he was a member (xviii). Nearly one hundred years later, at the end of the eighteenth century, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm of Germany also wrote down tales from the country folk. However, unlike Perrault, the Brothers Grimm were motivated by the tenets of nationalism and romanticism, writing during that time “when a modern Germany was being forged out of a patchwork of tiny states and principalities” (Hallett xvii-xviii). Whether to document the “true spirit of the people” or to provide entertainment for the rich and royal, fairy tales entered the literary realm. However, the literary fairy tale is not a static genre. The most popular stories of the fairy tale canon continue to evolve.

Rohmer’s *Conte d’hiver* represents another step in the evolution of the Cinderella story, providing a reflective reworking of the fairy tale happy ending. Félicie, who often remains isolated from the literary realm, is closer to the world, the



body, the visceral realm. Unlike Cinderella, Félicie meets her Prince Charming at the beginning of the story, as the opening of Rohmer's film portrays her initial summer romance with Charles. Throughout the film, Félicie must act on primal desires and needs, and remain true to her instincts and experiences, in the hope of being *reunited* with her "true love." Her desire for Charles is based on experience, not fantasy.

### **Once Upon a Time...**

The soft piano music that opens *Conte d'hiver* is unusual for a Rohmer film. While the presence of any music is uncommon in Rohmer's films, non-diegetic music is nearly non-existent.<sup>17</sup> However, the entire opening sequence of *Conte d'hiver* does not seem to utilize many, if any, of the stylistic qualities common to Rohmer's other films. Furthermore, the first scene takes place during the summer, an ironic opening for "a tale of winter." The audience is treated to a montage of the summer romance of Félicie and Charles.

As the piano music begins, the camera fades in to reveal a shot of the sea. The opening shot is composed of water and sky, which meet at a high horizon line. Gentle waves fill most of the frame. At the horizon, we can see the faint outline of a distant shore. In this way, Rohmer communicates the sentiment of that classic fairy tale opening, "Once upon a time, in a land far, far away...". The next shot shows Félicie and Charles fishing together on a boat at sea, which is followed by a shot of the couple cooking together in the restaurant where they met. Félicie looks lovingly at Charles as he prepares the fish. The subsequent succession of shots further portrays the young couple as carefree and blissfully happy with one another. They play together on a secluded beach in Brittany. Bathed in the yellow summer sunlight, Félicie, stripped down to her bikini bottoms, pulls Charles into the ocean. In the next

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<sup>17</sup> The final scene in *La Femme de l'aviateur* is one exception to this statement, when we hear Arielle Dombasle sing "Paris has charmed me."

shot, they lie together on another beautiful beach. Félicie is now completely nude as she teases Charles with a piece of seaweed. Next, they kiss passionately on the pier. In the following shot, they make love in the evening, their naked bodies intertwined. As the summer shots follow one after the other, the piano music continues to play. There is no dialogue, though we can often hear Félicie laughing as she teases and plays with Charles. In the montage, Rohmer creates the effect of flipping through the pages of a holiday photo album. We are able to glimpse the romance of Félicie and Charles. There is a sense that this montage represents both one and all of their days together. Throughout the shots of the montage, the camera focuses on Félicie's face, often leaving Charles in the shadows. She dominates the frame as she and Charles cook, kiss, and make love. Likewise, the film will centre on her emotions and her experience. As a Cinderella tale, this will be her story. We will stay with Félicie as she waits and hopes for Charles to return once they are cruelly separated. The montage, as a photo album, recalls the discourse of photography in *La Femme de l'aviateur*. In a similar manner, the montage serves to produce what Rohmer calls the "plastic expression" of their affair, but once the montage is over and summer comes to end, Rohmer will effectively "pierce the external shell" of the romance and explore Félicie's deeper feelings for not only Charles but also the other two men in her life, Loïc and Maxence (Crisp 12, 11).

In the penultimate scene of the montage, Félicie and Charles lie in bed together. Although we see only Félicie's body, we hear only Charles's voice, as he delivers the sole line of dialogue in the opening sequence, "You're taking a risk." Félicie laughs in response. But what is the risk that Félicie is taking? We can see that she has risked falling in love. We can also speculate that she has risked becoming pregnant. However, as Loïc will later explain to her, Félicie also takes the risk of

accepting Pascal's wager. As one who wagers everything on the chance of having eternal happiness with God, Félicie wagers everything on the chance of having eternal happiness with Charles. Félicie risks believing in the fairy tale, a risk akin to believing in God. Unlike the nameless, placeless "Trintignant" of *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, who cannot choose "between the finite and the infinite," Félicie eventually decides against the happiness she might have with Maxence, with only the smallest hope of a reunion with Charles, her fairy tale happy ending. As she later explains to Loïc, "If I find him, it'll be a joy so great. I'll gladly give my life for it."

When the summer comes to an end, the lovers must part. Charles will go to America to work in a restaurant for several months. Félicie will go back home. Before they say their final goodbye at the train station, Félicie gives Charles her address, but she makes a grave error. She tells him that she lives in "Courbevoie" instead of "Levallois." It is a simple "lapsus" 'slip of the tongue' that will separate Félicie and Charles for years. Read psychoanalytically, Félicie's "slip of the tongue," or perhaps "Freudian slip," might indicate that she is not ready to take the risk or to choose Charles. However, without her slip of the tongue, there would be no prolonged separation, and thus no opportunity for a fairy tale happy ending.

In the meantime, a title card tells us that five years have passed, while an intertitle informs us that it is Friday, December 14, eleven days before Christmas, eighteen days before the new year. The piano music has ended, and with it, the idyllic fairy tale setting. No longer does Félicie exist "once upon a time," but rather she is now firmly positioned in time and space and faced with the grim reality that she may never see Charles again. The summer sunlight of Brittany has faded. It is wintertime in Paris, and the sky is grey and cloudy. Gone are the languid days of nude sunbathing by the sea. Félicie now dons a heavy winter coat. She keeps her hood up

as she scurries through the city on her way to work. Instead of peaceful piano music, we hear the harsh screeching of trains. Looking melancholy, Félicie changes trains several times on her way to work. She hurries through crowds of commuting Parisians. Crossing a busy street, Félicie moves from left to right across the frame. The camera pans from left to right as well, following her movement. In several succeeding shots, Félicie crosses the street in a similar manner, moving from left to right. Each time, the camera pans to follow to her. The repetitive movement creates the feeling that Félicie is running in circles, and indeed, she is, figuratively at least. She believes that she has just spotted Charles, and she is anxiously trying to catch him. Eventually, she runs toward the camera in a busy market place. A point of view shot from her perspective reveals that Charles is not there. Félicie turns and walks away from the camera, going back the way she came. Félicie lives everyday in Paris with the hope that she might find Charles, or that he might find her. She is exhausted from the constant distraction and disappointment. It is little wonder, then, that in the following scene, she agrees to move to Nevers with her new lover, Maxence. Félicie plans to give up the hope of finding Charles by moving to a town where he will never find her. Félicie will attempt to sacrifice her dream of a fairy tale happy ending, so that she might live a “happy enough” life with Maxence.

### **Loïc Versus Maxence**

Félicie explains to her mother that Maxence “likes beautiful things,” while Loïc, her other lover, is more the “intellectual type.” After a moment of reflection, Félicie declares that she likes “strong men, not bookworms.”

Félicie works for Maxence at his salon in Paris. When she arrives at the salon on Friday, December 14, Maxence informs her that he has finally left his wife, and that he is moving to his hometown of Nevers, just two hours from Paris. He is

moving immediately, but he wants he wants Félicie and five-year-old Elise, daughter of Félicie and Charles, to join him after Christmas. He will operate a salon in Nevers, and Félicie can work there as well. Félicie agrees to visit him during the weekend to check out the town, the salon, and the apartment that she will share with Maxence and her daughter.

When Félicie visits Nevers, she approves of the town, the salon, and the apartment. The apartment they will share is above the salon. It is a modern apartment, with wall-to-wall carpeting and a wrap-around sofa. Empty bookshelves line the living room walls. Félicie comments that Maxence does not have enough books to fill the shelves. He replies that he will instead fill the shelves with “knickknacks.”

The next day, Félicie and Maxence wander around Nevers, seeing the sights. They visit a museum, a church, the old city. As they wander through a park, barren in winter, they discuss Charles. Maxence asks Félicie why she chose to have and keep Elise, even though she could not find Charles. Félicie explains that her decision to keep Elise was motivated by her convictions. Maxence asks if these were religious convictions. However, Félicie replies that she was motivated not by *religious* convictions, but rather by *intimate* convictions. Unlike Trintignant from *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, Félicie is not a “practicing” Catholic. She does not follow a religious dogma. Instead, her decisions are motivated by intimate convictions. She acts honestly and speaks frankly. She thus admits to Maxence that she loves him, but that she wants to love him more.

When Félicie returns to Paris, she must tell Loïc that she and Elise are moving to Nevers with Maxence. An intertitle tells us that she goes to Loïc’s on Tuesday, December 18. Loïc’s old house contrasts with Maxence’s modern apartment. Loïc’s

home has creaky wood floors, an original fireplace, and traditional furnishings. Bookshelves, overflowing with books, line the walls of his living room. While Maxence, a hairdresser with an empty bookcase and plenty of knickknacks, is aligned with the visual realm of beauty, Loïc, a librarian at the municipal library, is aligned with the literary realm. The *mise-en-scène* of Loïc's home is consequently crowded with books. Furthermore, Félicie will later tell Loïc, "You can't do without books. If I say I love you, you'll check to see if that's in a book too. To you, only what's written is true." Finally, Loïc explains to Félicie that he loves her not because she is beautiful, but because "he can 'read' her heart," like a book.

When Félicie arrives in the evening to tell him her news, she discovers that Loïc has company. He introduces her to Edwige and Quentin. Edwige, an assertive woman, gets up to shake Félicie's hand. Edwige speaks loudly, has short, spiky hair, and wears shoulder pads that give her a masculine physique. She tells Félicie, "We're having a discussion." As Quentin tries to introduce himself, Edwige interrupts him to ask Félicie, "Have you ever read *The Longest Journey*?"<sup>18</sup> Félicie confesses that she has not. Nonetheless, Edwige, Quentin and Loïc continue to discuss the opening scene of E.M. Forster's novel. Edwige remarks that there is more to the book than philosophy, while Quentin insists that, "It's important to explore the existence of reality." Félicie sits quietly. She appears uncomfortable and out of place. She retreats to the kitchen to prepare dinner, but Loïc shoos her back to the living room. Félicie has no place in Loïc's home. That Félicie cannot help in the kitchen is representative of the reality that Félicie cannot participate in the philosophical discussion with Loïc's friends. Félicie is uneasy in the literary realm.

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<sup>18</sup> The book title has been mistranslated in the English subtitles, which read *Journey's End*, a play by R.C. Sherriff. The book they are discussing, however, is E.M. Forster's *The Longest Journey*.

Later, sitting at the dinner table, the two couples are framed by the double wooden doors that open out from Loïc's dining room. Because of the particular composition of the shot, the open double doors resemble bookends, or perhaps the front and back cover of a book, positioning the four dinner guests within its pages. Edwige continues to control and dominate the conversation. Félicie remains silent. She is at once trapped and alienated in the literary realm. Loïc, who has evidently finished his meal, rises suddenly, and leaves the dinner table. Edwige and Quentin follow. All three walk out of frame, as the camera rests on Félicie, who is left alone in front of the camera, still quietly eating her meal. The dinner scene at Loïc's is similar to the dinner scene at Maud's in Rohmer's earlier film. While Maud and Vidal banter about Pascal and other literary topics at the dinner table, Trintignant falls silent. The camera stays on him while he continues to eat quietly. He cannot speak again until Maud invites him back into the conversation. Like Trintignant, who is powerless in Maud's literary realm, so too is Félicie powerless in Loïc's literary world.

On the other hand, Edwige is able to control and dominate the conversation, because she, like Maud, exists in the literary realm. As Maud has a patronizing approach toward Trintignant and his Catholic beliefs, so too has Edwige a condescending attitude towards Loïc and his Catholic convictions. She accuses Loïc, saying, "You're hooked by the charlatanism of the church." She also insists that reincarnation is compatible with Christianity. Loïc fights back, declaring that reincarnation is *not* compatible with Christianity, because it is not a moral idea. Loïc explains that, "It eliminates responsibility. You can only be responsible for one life." Edwige simply responds, "You'll never shed your moralism," and indeed he will not.

Loïc's "moralism" is inherent in his Catholic convictions and intrinsic to his worldview.

Félicie, however, disagrees with Loïc. She disagrees with his "moralism," his religious convictions and his worldview. She finally adds to the evening's conversation by saying simply, "I disagree." She explains that she believes that the soul lives in many bodies, gradually becoming perfect. She thus concludes that, "Responsibility is preserved." A low angle shot of Quentin reveals him peering at Félicie through his reading glasses, as if he is examining her through the superior lens of the literary realm. We hear Loïc's voice say, "That's fine, but to me, it's meaningless." Félicie, as if admitting defeat, merely replies, "I know I'm ignorant." Attempting to reject Loïc's "moralism," Félicie remains barred from the literary realm. For a *moraliste*, according to Rohmer, what matters is what they *think* about their behaviour, rather than the behaviour itself (Monaco 293). For Félicie, however, an unintentional slip of the tongue has separated her from the father of her daughter, the love of her life, for five years. Therefore, while Félicie is likewise concerned with motive, she also understands the importance and significance of action itself, regardless of underlying motivation. After her trip to Nevers, Félicie will begin to realize that choice can be unconscious.

When Edwige and Quentin finally leave, Félicie and Loïc return to the living room. In the same space where Quentin was intent on exploring "the existence of reality," Félicie must now confront Loïc with the reality of her departure to Nevers. While Trintignant could not truly decide between Françoise and Maud, Félicie, by contrast, declares, "I've reached a decision." Pacing the length of the living room, she continues, "Making a decision is not always easy. There are pros and cons. Then you decide because you must." She stops pacing and turns toward Loïc, facing the camera



as if to confront our gaze, and announces, “I’m leaving with Maxence.” Unlike Rohmer’s men, who “emphasize the possibility of choice rather than the activity of it,” Félicie makes a definite decision (Monaco 295). Whether the choice is right or wrong, Félicie’s free decision contributes to the creation of herself. Barred from the literary realm, Félicie may not be a *moraliste*, but her power to make a decision, her ability to choose, commits her to her own moral code.

### **In the Theatre: William Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale***

After only one day in Nevers, Félicie decides, in a moment of clarity, to leave Maxence and move back to Paris. Although her chances of finding Charles are dim, she decides that she will do nothing that might make it more difficult for him to find her. Her first night back in Paris, Félicie accompanies Loïc to the theatre and weeps during a performance of William Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*.

Before the performance, Loïc describes the play to Félicie, explaining that, “Lots of fantastic things happen. People who were thought dead, who were in exile, reappear, resurrected.” Félice, however, replies, “Okay. If it’s like “Romeo,” I’ll like it.” In some ways, it is easy to imagine why Félicie would be drawn to the love story of *Romeo and Juliet*. Believing that Charles is her one, true love, positions Félicie as a romantic, eager for a love story. However, Félicie is also instinctively driven towards a happy ending, an ending not reached in Shakespeare’s tragedy. Perhaps because Félicie does not occupy the literary realm, she does not recall the tragic end to the famous love story. It is significant then, that she does not read *The Winter’s Tale*, but rather watches a live performance. Gazing at the actors on stage, Félicie is able to comprehend fully even the subtleties of the play. It is as if she is experiencing the story herself. She later admits to Loïc, “When the statue moved, I almost screamed.”

*The Winter's Tale*, written by Shakespeare in the “winter” of his life and career, was one of the playwright’s last. The narrative entails the miraculous restoration of Queen Hermione. Wrongly banished by a jealous husband and cruelly separated from her infant daughter for sixteen years, the Queen is believed dead. The theatrical scene that Rohmer depicts in his film is from Act 5, in which a statue of Hermione magically comes to life. In a scene echoing Jacques Rivette’s theatrical film, *La Bande des quatre/Gang of Four* (1988), Félicie is portrayed in the dark audience of the theatre, surrounded by fellow spectators and captivated by the story. On stage, the King embraces his wife, and Hermione gives her daughter her blessing. A cut to Félicie reveals that she is enraptured by the performance, holding tight to Loïc’s hand and weeping. The scene on stage ends with mother, father and daughter reconciled and reunited. Recognizing the parallels between the play and her own situation, the abandoned infant daughter, the cruel years of separation, Félicie is moved to tears. The resurrection of Queen Hermione and the reunion of the divided family seem to affirm Félicie’s decision to leave Nevers and return to Paris, where she can maintain at least the smallest hope that she and Charles will be reunited.

### **Plato, Pascal and the Fairy Tale Ending**

Loïc is surprised to find Félicie so moved by the performance. Though he claims to be able to “read” Félicie, he does not “read” the obvious parallels that she draws between Shakespeare’s tale and her own story. When he drives her home, they discuss Félicie’s interpretation of the play. Surprisingly, it is Loïc who does not quite understand the message of Shakespeare’s play, while Félicie must explain it to him. Rohmer perhaps reinforces the notion that the theatre, the medium of the “body,” exists outside the literary realm, the abstract medium of the “word.” Félicie, who also exists outside the literary realm, encounters the performance as if it were her own

experience, while Loïc, locked in the literary realm, finds himself incapable of comprehending the subtleties of the play. Consequently, Loïc interrogates Félicie about her analysis of *The Winter's Tale*. He asks, "Does magic bring the statue back to life, or hadn't she ever died?" Félicie replies earnestly, "You don't get it. Faith brings her back to life." She adds, "I'm more religious than you." Félicie goes on to explain the moment of clarity she experienced while sitting in the cathedral in Nevers, the moment she decided to leave Maxence and return to Paris. She explains that she was praying, but not as she was taught to pray as a child. Instead she prayed, "In my own way," explaining that, "It's more of a reflection than a prayer." The cathedral, in this case, plays a much different role than Trintignant's Notre-Dame in *Ma Nuit chez Maud*. While the cathedral of Clermont-Ferrand is portrayed as a crowded space, particularly during the midnight mass on Christmas eve, the cathedral of Nevers, depicted just after the Christmas holiday, is an empty, quiet place of reflection. Furthermore, while Trintignant, the "practicing" Catholic, goes to Sunday mass to find a wife, Félicie, a self-declared "non-practicing" Catholic, sits in the deserted church to experience a moment of clarity. The interior of the cathedral reflects Félicie's inner exploration, what Rohmer calls the "developing awareness of [her]self" (Crisp 12).

As Félicie explains to Loïc the moment of clarity that she experienced in the cathedral, he stops driving to focus on what she is saying. Pulled over, on a suburban street in Paris, Félicie and Loïc occupy the quiet darkness of the car's interior. As with the cathedral, this dark, silent space reflects inner exploration. When we contrast the opening montage sequence of Félicie and Charles at the beach – a sunny, purely visual representation of the couple overlaid with peaceful piano music – with the following dialogue that takes place in the dark space of Loïc's car, we can propose

that Rohmer is using the visual obscurity of the darkness “to pierce the external shell of things” and to portray “reflection” (Crisp 11-12). As the dialogue between Félicie and Loïc unfolds, the emphasis is placed, not on the image of them together, but rather on the discourse itself. Félicie is likewise no longer the nude “image” of herself on the beach, but rather a “voice.” With her “image” hidden under the heavy layers of her winter coat – like the layers of textuality that now serve as a reference point for her to measure herself against – Félicie is forced to develop her voice to re-establish her authority in the narrative. Though she may never fully occupy the literary realm, she must become, in some ways, more like Maud and Edwige.

As the conversation between Loïc and Félicie continues, Félicie explains her moment of clarity in the Nevers cathedral, relating that, “All my reasoning on whether to leave or not came in a flash... I saw what I had to do, and I saw I was right. Before, I’d tried to choose, then I saw there was no choice. I didn’t have to choose something I didn’t want.” While Trintignant, makes one, clear decision in the opening of *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, “On that Monday, the 21<sup>st</sup> December... I suddenly knew, without a doubt, that Françoise would be my wife,” he proceeds to waver on this almost arbitrary decision during his night at Maud’s. Faced with a real choice, Françoise or Maud, Trintignant is unable to choose. Félicie, by contrast, makes several, often contradictory, decisions throughout *Conte d’hiver*. She moves to Nevers, and then she leaves Nevers. She accepts Maxence, and then she rejects Maxence. Each time Félicie makes a decision, however, she acts accordingly. When she realizes that she no longer wants to be with Maxence, she does not waver. She does not procrastinate telling him, but rather she expresses her intentions immediately. Unlike Trintignant, who, according to Maud, does not “know his own mind,” because he cannot make a definite choice, Félicie is able to see her mind so clearly, that her

decision is no longer even a question of choice, but rather of instinct. Furthermore, Félicie's instinct for a fairy tale happy ending derives from the same unconscious choice that separated her from Charles. Félicie thus chooses to return to Paris and wait, indefinitely if necessary, for Charles to find her.

Upon hearing Félicie's explanation for returning to Paris, Loïc can only ask, "But why ruin your life?" Félicie responds, "Because if I find him, it'll be so... a joy so great. I'll gladly give my life for it." Here, Félicie not only articulates her instinctive desire for a fairy tale happy ending, but also she expresses the logic of Pascal's wager. Where Pascal's wager states, "Let us weigh up the gain and the loss by calling heads that God exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win, you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager that he exists then, without hesitating!" Félicie's wager might say, "Let us weigh up the gain and the loss by calling heads that I will be reunited with Charles. Let us assess the two cases: if I win, I win everything; if I lose, I lose nothing. Wager that I will be reunited with Charles then, without hesitating!" (Pascal 154). While Trintignant refuses to acknowledge the wager, declaring that he does not like the "lottery" aspect of Pascal, Félicie not only accepts the wager, she internalizes it and "calls heads" that she will be reunited with Charles.

Loïc recognizes and tries to point out the connection between Félicie's instincts and Pascal's philosophy, but Félicie, whose voice is growing stronger, continues talking and begins philosophizing. She confronts Loïc's earlier claims about reincarnation, challenging, "If a soul lives on afterward, why didn't it live before?" She explains that the reason she is absolutely sure that she loves Charles is because, "When I met him, I felt I'd been through it before." She challenges Loïc again, asking, "How do you explain it unless we met in a former life?" Instead of

answering her question, Loïc explains that Félicie is no longer reasoning like Pascal, but rather like Plato. He explains that, “[Plato] reasoned just like you to prove the soul’s immortal. It’s called reasoning by ‘recollection.’ Félicie understands the theory of recollection instinctively, because when she met Charles, she felt her soul recognized his soul. As she is connected to Charles through memory, Félicie is also driven, instinctually, to her fairy tale happy ending.

Later, when Loïc and Félicie have tea in Loïc’s living room, Loïc reads aloud from Plato’s dialogues. As he reads, he stands in the corner of the room, illuminated by a reading lamp and gesturing with his hands like an orator. He projects an authoritative air, confident in the literary realm. He begins with, “Cebes added: Your doctrine, that knowledge is simply recollection, if true, also implies a previous time in which we have learned that which we now recollect. This would be impossible unless our soul has been someplace before existing in the form of man.” Loïc stops reading and explains that the quote was on his college finals. He claims that he has never forgotten it. However, he has never “lived” it either. Loïc calls Plato’s theory a myth, while Félicie feels that she has experienced first hand the phenomenon of recollection. Existing in the literary realm, Loïc can only “read” philosophy, while Félicie, existing outside the literary realm, who is stirred not by the abstract medium of the “word,” but rather by the live performance of the theatre, evidently experiences the philosophy in “real” life. Similarly, while Félicie is absolutely certain that she loves Charles, Loïc is “certain” that he loves Félicie only because he can “read” her. Félicie does not want to be “read,” but wants to be loved. In the same way, Félicie is not striving for an ideological happy ending, as is Trintignant who is motivated by religious convictions in *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, but rather she is driven toward an unambiguous happy ending, the “happily ever after” of fairy tales. While Trintignant’s happy ending is ironic, an

idyllic union based on a series of transgressions and lies, Félicie's final reunion with Charles is evidently an authentic happy ending, marked by tears of joy, not only from Félicie, but also from five-year-old Elise.

## Conclusion

Elise's "tears of joy" suggest that we are witnessing the reunion of Félicie and Charles through the eyes of a child. The film's fairy tale beginning and fairy tale end bookend the film. We begin with "Once upon a time," and end with "happily ever after." Everything in between, however, exists in the cold, harsh reality of wintertime in Paris, outside the fantastical world of the fairy tale.

Fairy tales were appropriated from a verbal genre for the literary realm. The stories came from individual experience and, as oral tales, were used to communicate morals and life lessons. In the literary realm, fairy tales became representations of moral codes. Rohmer, by appropriating the fairy tale as a literary model for his film, reflects on the notion of the fairy tale happy ending.

When we witness the reunion of Félicie and Charles in the final scenes of *Conte d'hiver*, we identify with the fairy tale happy ending. However, we are also invited to "read" it as such. The happy ending of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, acted out in the theatre for Félicie, forecasts the happy ending of Rohmer's fairy tale, both for her and for us, as spectators. Rohmer uses literary intertexts and codes to force us, as spectators to both experience the happy ending, but also "read" it – as fantasy or fantastic coincidence. The ending of *Conte d'hiver* is not a naïve, childlike, Hollywood happy ending, but rather a happy ending that compels us to ask, why? Why does Félicie deserve to be reunited with Charles? In fairy tales, the happy ending is a reward for moral behaviour. In Rohmer's film, the happy ending derives from a sense of predetermination, as well as from Félicie's instinctual drive, her faith

in fate against the rational, against the logic of the world, which, in turn, confirms the film's sense of predetermination. Finally, Félicie arrives at her happy end, because the conclusion of "Once upon a time," can only ever be, "happily ever after." Because Rohmer's film reflects on this paradigm, the fairy tale happy ending is perhaps ironic after all.



## Conclusion

In 1954, Rohmer's New Wave colleague, François Truffaut, proposed the revolutionary film ideology of the *Politique des Auteurs*, demanding that filmmakers no longer consider their role to be that of "technical director," but rather *auteur*. Truffaut's *politique* advocates for filmmakers to present their work from a personal perspective. Rohmer's films not only reflect a personal perspective but also use literariness to create a new cinema that, in turn, might express something new.

In "Le Celluloïd et le marbre," Rohmer's first major critical contribution to the *Cahiers*, he declares:

Je voudrais, auparavant, qu'on m'accordât deux choses: la première c'est qu'il n'existe pas de fiction pure; les plus grands créateurs ont tous puisé soit dans un fonds historique ou mythique, soit dans les "fait divers" ou leur expérience propre. La seconde est que le "style" n'a jamais été et ne peut être ni le souci exclusif du romancier [...]. (36)

I would like two things granted me: the first is that there is no pure fiction; the great creators drew everything from either historical or mythical sources, either from the "daily news stories" or from their own experience. The second is that "style" never was and never can be the exclusive concern of the novelist [...]. (my translation)

Rohmer thus aspires to be not only an *auteur*, but also a "great creator" (36). As the great creators before him, Rohmer draws not only from filmic sources, but also from generations of literary conventions. In doing so, however, Rohmer's own style, his own perspective, emerges in his films, such as his inimitable exploration of irony and morality.

In *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, Rohmer examines the moral complexity of Hermann Sudermann's "The trip to Tilsit." Rohmer draws from the moral tale to explore Pascal's *Pensées* in the historical context of post-Vichy Clermont-Ferrand. Rohmer also uses irony in both a literary and filmic context to look at the ethics of choice. By exploring Sartre's proposal that, "the moment of choice [...] commits [one] to a moral

code and a whole way of life,” Rohmer exposes the moral ambiguity of not only Vichy politics, but also Catholicism (4).

In *La Marquise d'O...*, Rohmer adapts Kleist's novella, *The Marquise of O...*. Perhaps due to their aversion to the literary adaptations of the *Tradition de la Qualité*, most New Wave filmmakers reinvent adaptation in their own idiom. Godard, for example, adapted Alberto Moravia's *Le Mépris/Contempt* in 1964. Rivette adapted Denis Diderot's *La Religieuse/The Nun* in 1966, while Truffaut himself adapted Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, also in 1966. In Rohmer's adaptation of *The Marquise of O...*, he honours the original language of Kleist's German novella. Furthermore, Rohmer preserves the archaic, stilted language of Kleist's text, which draws attention to the “word” of Kleist. Rohmer's attention to not only the “word,” but also the novellesque structure of Kleist's tale, produces a film that explores a moral dilemma through literary irony. The solution to the Marquise's dilemma is her acceptance of an immoral act, which not only contradicts her virtuous character, but also challenges prejudices, social standards, and norms of behaviour.

In *La Femme de l'aviateur*, Rohmer explores the proverb, “One can't think of nothing,” to confront the notion that nothing ever changes. In a film tied to the “image,” that uses the mise-en-scène in a “writerly” way, Rohmer repositions Parmendies's philosophical quandary to ask, can we change our view of the world? Can we revise our notion of morality to accommodate an often-deceitful “image”? Although the film's ending offers closure in the mise-en-scène – François on his way back to the sorting office for another night of work – the story offers nothing but moral ambiguity. We cannot know for sure if François is content with Anne, nor do we really know how he feels about Lucie. François simply fades into the labyrinth of Paris and an endless maze of misperceptions.

In *Conte d'hiver*, Rohmer uses the fairy tale to frame a love story set in contemporary Paris. By appropriating the fairy tale as a literary model for his film, Rohmer reflects on the notion of the fairy tale “happy ending.” Exploring not only Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, but also Plato’s theory of the soul’s recollection and Pascal’s wager, Rohmer invites the film spectator to both “experience” and “read” the film’s happy ending. If *Conte d’hiver* were simply a fairy tale, Félicie would be reunited with Charles because of her adherence to a moral code. Rohmer’s film, however, is more complex than this. In the film, the happy ending derives from a sense of predetermination, as well as from Félice’s instinctual drive, her faith in fate against the rational, against the logic of the world, which, in turn, confirms the film’s sense of predetermination. Furthermore, Félicie is rewarded because, unlike, Rohmer’s men, Félicie exercises the activity of choice, rather than the possibility of it. In doing so, she not only commits herself to a moral code, but also to a “fairy tale” way of life.

Although he draws from both filmic and literary sources, Rohmer’s personal perspective is evident. Rohmer uses literariness not only to make us focus on the formal conventions of film, but also to explore the strong cultural resonance of irony and morality, and the irony in morality, from the fascist perspective of Vichy France to the feminist perspective of a contemporary Parisian fable. From “post-war” to “postmodern,” Rohmer’s use of literariness is his hallmark as an *auteur*. Exploring both filmmaking and writing, however, Rohmer is not only an *auteur*, but also a veritable author, and ultimately, a “great creator” (“Le Celluloid et le marbre” 36).

Rohmer’s use of literariness is not merely a tribute to intellectual tradition, but a continuing dialogue between filmic and literary conventions. Rohmer explores the role of literary tradition in film and uses literariness to express something new, to

“say *something else*, which we had not, until now, thought of expressing” (“Le Celluloid et le marbre” 33). Ultimately, Rohmer invokes the literary realm to explore the inner realm, to portray reflection, and to reflect on a developing awareness of the world, which he *could* not, until now, thought of expressing.

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